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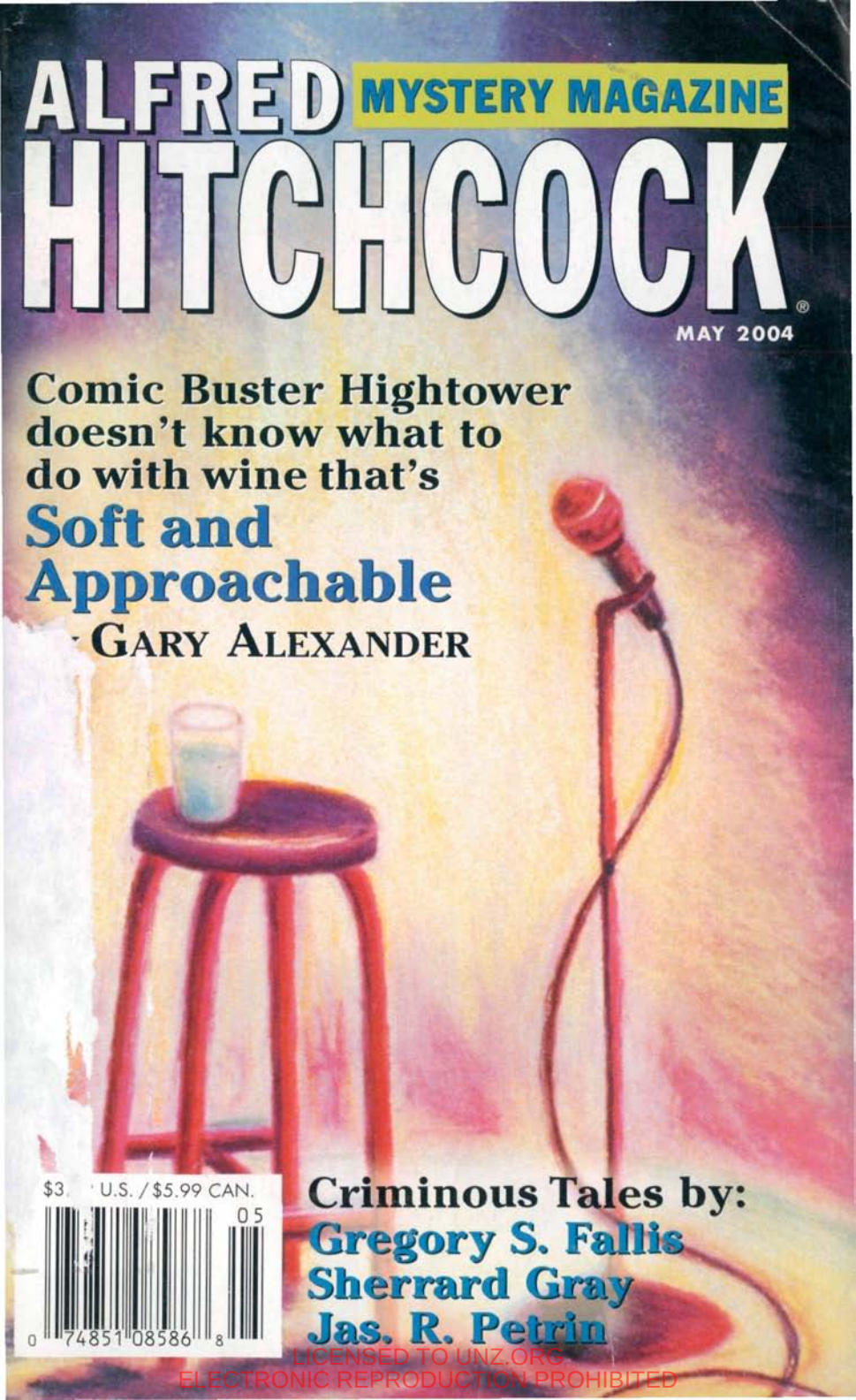
MAY 2004

Comic Buster Hightower doesn't know what to do with wine that's

Soft and Approachable

GARY ALEXANDER



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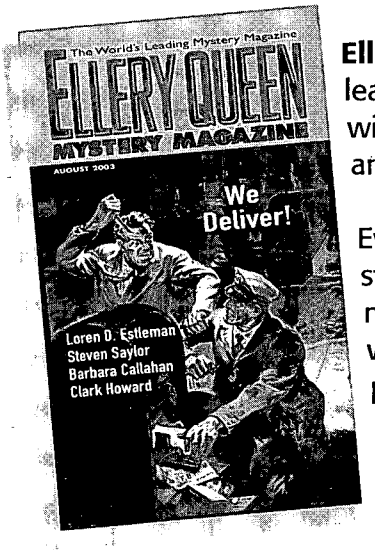

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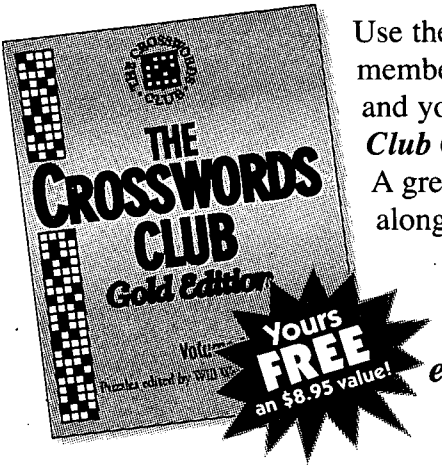

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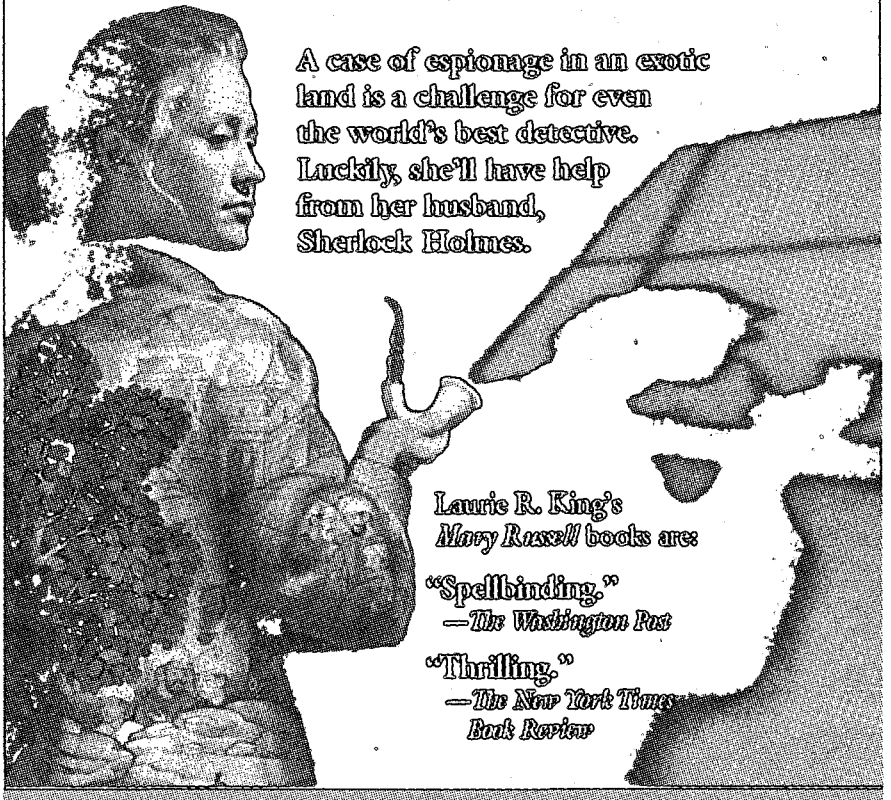

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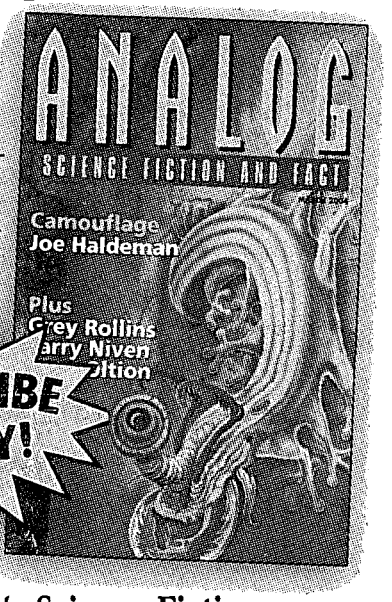

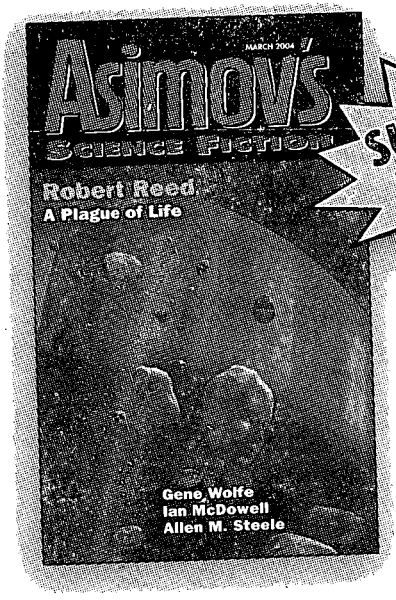

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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

THERE'S MORE TO CRIME THAN GLOOM AND DOOM!

Alfred Hitchcock, the master of the macabre, was never averse to a bit of comic relief, and neither is the magazine that bears his name. For the second year in a row, we have prepared a humor issue in time for April Fool's Day.

This month's authors "bring the funny" in a variety of ways. Whether it's the wry narrative voice of Gregory S. Fallis's P.I. Joop in "Dog on Fire" or the offbeat characters in Sherrard Gray's story "Junk and Disorderly" or the outrageous situations of Will Ludwigsen's "Bingo" and Robert Lopresti's "A Bad Day for Pink and Yellow Shirts," we think there's something here to tickle every funny bone.

Some of your favorite characters return for this special issue too. Buster Hightower is in top form in Gary Alexander's "Soft and Approachable." Meanwhile, in "The House on Back Street" by Jas. R. Petrin, the residents of End of Main coalesce around what looks like a serial murder; soon enough there are too many sleuths on the case, but fortunately one is the now-retired Chief Robideau.

We are also pleased to introduce a new author, Brian Richmond. Mr. Richmond is the creative director for an advertising agency and lives in County Donegal, Ireland. He tell us, "I grew up in Belfast through 'The Troubles.' I now live on the Inishowen Peninsula, the most northerly part of Ireland, surrounded by standing stones, Norman ruins, and Napoleonic fortifications." Adding, "Oh, and fairies." "The Good Kid" is Mr. Richmond's first published story.

As an antidote to the high spirits, this month's book review column by Robert C. Hahn rounds up some bone-chilling thrillers.

Enjoy this issue, but fair warning—you might just die laughing.

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THE HOUSE ON BACK STREET

JAS. R. PETRIN

They sent Chubby in first.

Darren Dudyk explained it this way: First, he said, Chubby Kettering was the oldest, so it was right that he should lead the way; second, he pointed out to them, Chubby was the new guy in the group, and this was a chance to prove himself; and third, he said—frowning hard, having to work on this one—Chubby was, well, chubby, and so any murderer lurking inside the old house, holed up there, hiding out from the cops, just might see him as a potential victim, someone who couldn't run too fast and get away, and that would bring him out into the open where the other two could get a good look at him and describe him to the authorities when they ran to get help.

The reward would be split three ways, even money.

"How do we know there's a reward?" Chubby wanted to know.

"There's always a reward for murderers," Darren said.

"And how do we know the murderer's inside this place?"

"It's exactly the kind of place he *would* be. Right where those old people got killed all those years ago."

"And what about me?" Chubby asked. "You guys are running to get help—what about me?"

"We'd be back pretty quick," Darren assured him. "You'd only be at his mercy, say, eight or ten minutes."

"Only ten minutes? Well, that's cool, then, isn't it?" Chubby said, pouting, meaning there was nothing cool about it at all. His round cheeks were flushed. "Not much a murderer can do in ten minutes. Some big sweaty guy. With an ax!"

Lawrence Hodge spoke up: "Look, someone's got to be first in

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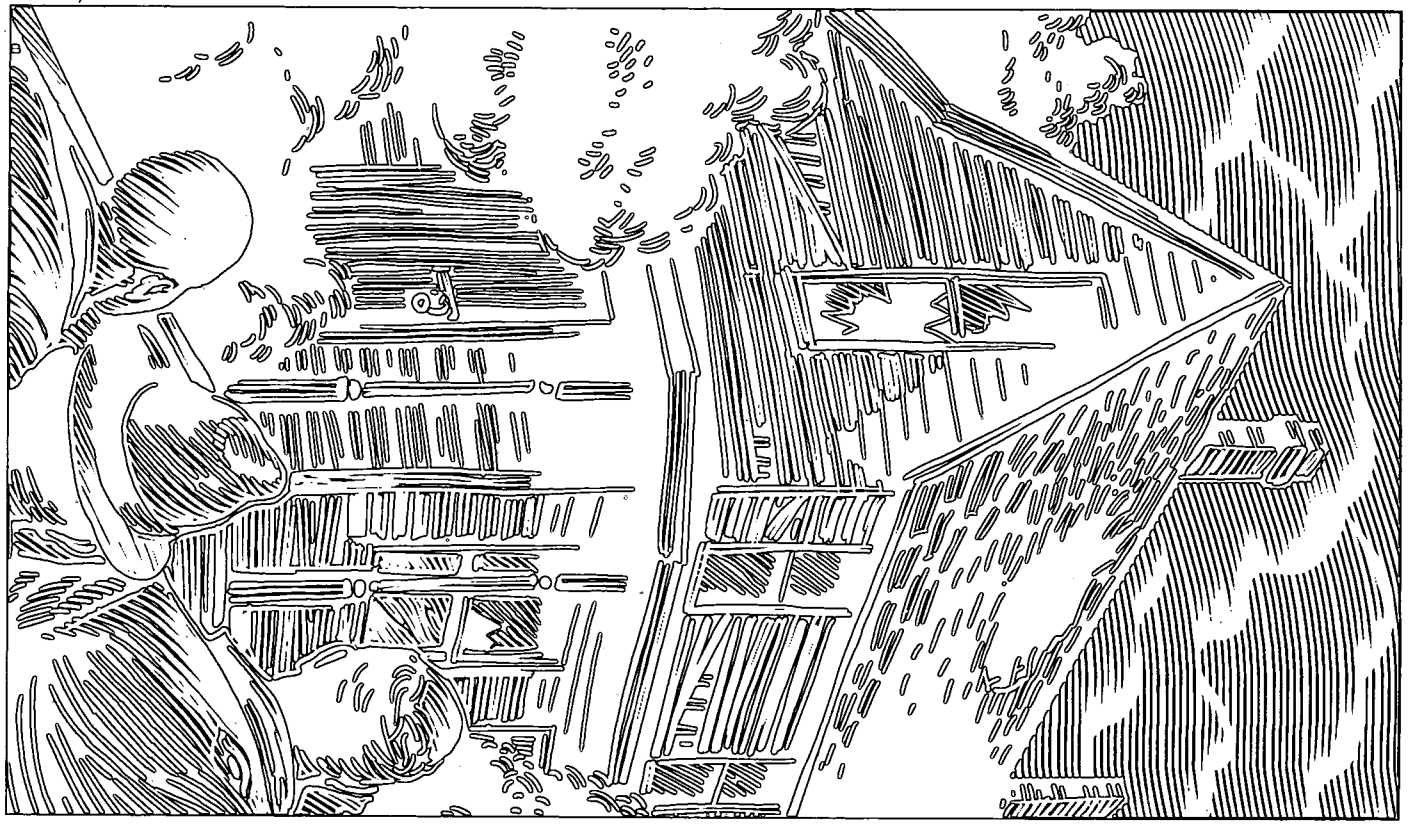
Tim Foley



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there, it might as well be you. And there's nothing to worry about, we're right behind you."

"Yeah," Darren said. "Behind you."

So in the end Chubby had to go in.

One thing that almost stopped him, they found the front door padlock had been torn off, the part of the hasp that had been fixed to the house pulled away, the screws yanked right out of the wood; all of it still there, though, so that with the door shut it looked from a distance as if the lock was okay. There was only the inner door—the outer storm door had been missing for years.

"Jeez," Chubby said, pulling back, "I dunno!"

"What's your problem?" Darren said, though his voice had lost some of its authority. "This is a good thing. We want him to be in there, right? I mean, if we're going to get that reward, we got to find the guy, right?"

Darren stepped forward, twisted the handle, and shoved the door hard with his foot. It only moved partway before jamming against a heaved floor within. No matter how hard they shoved, it wouldn't open farther. It was no good Chubby arguing that this changed things, that now it made sense for the skinniest of them—Lawrence—to go in. The guys were already helping him along, shoving him bodily in through the opening, the door remaining jammed against the floor inside, but giving a fair bit at the top when they leaned on it. Chubby let out a whimper as his belly dragged across a splinter. Then he was in.

"What do you see?" Darren stood hunched at the partly opened door, speaking through the gap.

Chubby sounded cold and lost inside, the tone of his voice four years younger.

"It's d-dark in here. Gimme a m-minute."

"What do you *see?*"

"N-nothing. Only a . . . a kitchen . . ."

"No murderer?"

"No . . ." Pause. "Would you gimme the flashlight? Or at least shine it in here?"

Darren motioned Lawrence to beam the flashlight inside. "Okay," he said, "we're coming in."

But they didn't go in. They didn't get that far. They didn't even make it partway because right at that moment Chubby let out a bleat. Then he started to scream. Short, loud, piercing shrieks that didn't really sound like Chubby at all, shrieks that went through Darren and Lawrence like jagged icicles, again and again.

They turned and ran.

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Lawrence dropped the flashlight—his dad's, a really good Tuffy Lite, rugged black plastic with a protective red rubber collar around it. It bounced once on the weathered shiplap floor of the porch, rolled off the top step and banged on the stair below, then stopped. It wobbled a few times.

"Whadaya mean, they arrested Wolverton?" Pete Melynchuk said. He was squatting on the ground. He gave the screw-jack one more crank of the handle, then with a grunt grasped the front wheel in his two rough hands and yanked it off the truck. "What for?"

"I dunno," Wilmer Gates said. "Murder or manslaughter, something like that. They think he's the Willow Island Killer."

Pete blinked at that. He straightened up and wiped his hands on his shirt. "You gotta be kidding me. Old Wolverton? They think he's the one? He couldn't slaughter a cockroach, everybody knows that."

"I'm not sure of the details, only what Giz Harp told me outside the Co-op. There's a body, some kids found it at the old house on Back Street, and Wolverton got fingered. That new police chief—Butts, the one replaced Robideau?—come and took him away this morning and locked the poor guy up."

"Who died?"

"Died?"

"Who was the victim?"

"Oh. I dunno who. Some stranger, apparently. Not from around here."

Pete picked up his lug wrench, looked at it, dropped it with a clang. He rocked back on his haunches. Sat there like some large, pale monkey with his forearms resting on his knees.

He said, "That new chief's an idjit. We need Robideau back. The idea of him going and retiring on us like that."

"You never liked Robideau."

"I like him now. Compared to this guy."

"Yeah, so what about Wove? He needs help."

Pete sighed, surveying the naked, rusted brake caliper. The brake job would have to wait.

"I guess you're right, we got to go and bust that moron out," Pete said.

He reached for the wheel and began to wrestle it back on.

Busting Wolverton out wasn't that difficult, since the new chief wasn't ready to charge him yet. He couldn't. He didn't have enough evidence. All he had was the fact that he'd spotted

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Wolverton in the Netley Bar trying to sell a red and black flashlight, which apparently belonged to one of the kids who had run to Butts screaming about the body.

In fact, Wolverton was coming down the front steps of the End of Main public safety building, when they arrived there with a squeal of brakes. He was holding one skinny arm over his eyes and blinking as if the light of freedom was too strong for him, gripping the iron railing tight with his other hand and cautiously taking each limestone step one at a time. They hustled him into the truck and roared off with him as if it really was a jailbreak. Only when they were seated around a table at the Netley did Pete demand to hear Wolverton's story. This had to be accomplished through translation, of course: the Wove, who rarely spoke out loud, mumbled short sentences into Wilmer's ear, and Wilmer repeated them aloud for Pete's benefit.

"Is he sayin' he wasn't even in the house?" Pete asked in disbelief, his eyebrows drawn in wiry tufts above his eyes.

The Wove mumbled.

"He says he might sort of been in the house," Wilmer said.

"How can you *sort of* be in a house? You're in a house, or you're not! Unless you're half in and half out, stuck in a window or something!"

The Wove's lips moved.

"He says, all right, he was in it, then."

"And this body the kids found. He didn't see it?"

More mumbling.

"He says he might of. He wasn't particularly noticing."

"He wasn't noticing!" Pete drew his hand down his face. "I suppose he gets used to stepping over bodies, that flophouse where he lives." Pete tried again. "So where'd he find the flashlight?"

Mumbling.

"He says it was just lying there by the front porch of the place," Wilmer said. "He saw it when he come around the side of the house from the back, the sun shining on it, and he stopped by the front porch there and picked it up."

"And you never saw nothing? Never saw those kids in there?" Addressing himself directly to the Wove.

The Wove shook his head.

"Because what I'm telling you," Pete said, "is your friend Butts could still try to put this jacket on you, so whatever you know about this, you better tell us. Only way we can help you. We need the whole story."

The Wove considered this, then mumbled.

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"He says there might of been something happened at the house, he isn't really sure exactly."

"Like what?"

"He doesn't know what," Wilmer said.

Pete grimaced as if he had been taken by a particularly fiery gas pain.

"You're still holding out on us. I think you know more than you're telling here, Wove."

Wolverton shrugged.

They finished their beer, put back another round, Pete muttering and grousing the whole time; then they each had one more for the road and went out onto the street. They hadn't gone ten paces when Mrs. Charfonte, coming out of the Stop and Shop, did a double take, almost dropping her shopping bag, and let out a scream. "That's him! That's the murderer! And he's loose? This is criminal! We got no law anymore! We need Chief Robideau back!"

Pete and Wilmer bundled the Wove into the truck and took off out of there, rusted exhaust pipes crackling.

"Is this how it's gonna be from now on? Us rescuing you?" Pete wanted to know.

Mrs. Robideau held up her hand to shush their conversation, and tilted her head at the radio on the kitchen counter. The announcer, for the second time since they had been sitting there discussing whether or not to take a retirement cruise that coming winter, was giving the details of the murder on Back Street. It was as if Mrs. Robideau couldn't get enough of it.

Robideau said, reaching for another cookie, then staying his hand, thinking better of it, "You never used to take an interest in violent crime. Not when I was a policeman." He stifled a yawn.

She straightened as the announcer went on to other matters. "Didn't I? No, I suppose I didn't. Maybe that's because I knew at least one of us was taking an interest. Now it's different. There you are, you don't seem to care at all anymore. I bet if they announced the biggest crime spree in the world—murderers, burglars, rapists, all gone hog-wild, rampaging—you'd just sit there yawning."

"It's not my job anymore. It's somebody else's."

"Sure it is. That Butts." She said the name as if it had a bitter taste. "When I have to rely on that Butts for my personal public safety, then I guess I might as well lie down and paint Xs over my eyes."

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"You don't trust Chief Butts?"

"Get a grip. That character? He's retired, for crying out loud—same as you—only you're honest enough to admit it. Hear what that announcer just told us? Butts is saying the murder on Back Street could be connected with those other murders down at the lake—at Willow Island and Ponemah. Well, duh! Thanks for the hot tip, chief. I could of figured that one out. I did, in fact."

"I wonder . . ." Robideau said, tapping the back of his spoon on the tabletop, one arm draped over the chair back.

"You wonder what?"

"If they really are connected."

"So you *are* taking an interest."

"Just idly concerned, that's all."

"You're bored. You want to go back to work. You don't like being at home with me."

"I'm not bored, and I do like being at home. Tea and cookies anytime I want them—what's not to like? On the other hand, I'm still alive, you know. I still feel I can contribute something." He narrowed his eyes. "Maybe the new chief could use a good investigator. Say, on an informal basis."

"What? Go back to work again? And not be chief? Work under that . . . that *Butts?*" Her cheeks were flushed and she was sitting up straight in her chair. "I couldn't stand it. I really mean it. For God's sake, say you're kidding me!"

What Robideau really needed was access to his old files, the ones he had so painstakingly assembled over the years. But these newspaper stacks, here at the public library, would have to do for a start. They weren't hung, and there had never been enough money to microfilm or scan them. They were yellowing and fragile, and he handled them gently.

His hand sought out 1992, hovered briefly over the August editions, then came to rest on those dating from September of that year. He selected several, then carried them carefully on the flat of his hands to the reading table. After five minutes or so of glancing at headlines, he suddenly raised his eyebrows and began to nod . . .

It was worse than they thought, Pete said. Not only was Chief Butts out to nail Wolverton, poor Wove was in danger of being attacked by the local citizenry. No telling what could happen, a frenzied mob of housewives got ahold of him. So what they had to do was get to the bottom of this thing fast. What they had to do,

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Pete told them, was visit the murder scene, have a boo at the situation themselves. Wilmer said it wouldn't be possible, the place would be off-limits, posted, the scene of a murder. Pete reminded him that this was the Interlake, not some teeming metropolis—what was Butts going to do, stand guard there day and night all by himself? Never happen. They'd wait till the coast was clear, then waltz on in.

Not only was Chief Butts out to nail Wolverton, poor Wove was in danger of being attacked by the local citizenry.

"When'll that be?" Wilmer asked.

"Well, not in the daylight," Pete said.

"Then it'll have to be—"

"Right."

Wilmer let out his breath in a thin, anxious whistle.

Back Street was aptly named. It was back, all right—*way* back. Practically out of town, almost out of the municipality. And the house was on the far side of it, standing all by itself against the leafy darkness of the woods. Another forty yards and it would have been outside the town line and no longer Butts's problem, which would have been fine by him, thank you very much. He'd been surprised when the first stiff turned up at Willow Island, and relieved when the second one was found down there at Ponemah. Relieved in a manner of speaking, anyway. Murder cases he didn't need. He had taken this job after retiring from the Winnipeg city police, a thirty-year man with the scars to prove it, most of them in his back where the knives had gone in—the knives of office politics. He should have spent his last five years as an inspector, which would have given him a pension he could live on, so that he wouldn't have had to take this job; but by then senior management had had it in for him, which is why he pulled the pin on them and opted for this position as chief of police in a sleepy little town up by the lake. Spend five years writing parking tickets for farm tractors, sock some cash away, and then, by God, retire properly, once and for all.

That had been the plan. And now this.

The body had been whisked away to the city. No equipment here for anything like a proper examination. He would have to wait for the lab report to know for sure what had killed the jerk,

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but, gee, it couldn't have been that whack on the head, shattered the bone there and left a dent an inch deep, could it?

Legwork. Show whatever had made that dent, and bingo, you had the murder weapon. Show who'd had the murder weapon and you had a solved case. No rocket science here, it just had to be believable. And juries believed the obvious.

Hell, he already had the yahoo in possession of the flashlight, didn't he?

He got up from the big dark desk and went out into the reception area and said to Claudia Webb, with her hands hovering over her keyboard, "I need you to make some calls for me. Pester the hell out of that lab, get Dr. Gillies up on his toes, nice and hot, let him know we're not gonna sit around here drumming our fingers while he takes his sweet time deciding to call us. Make sure he knows I want that report. Make sure and mention my name."

"You know him?" Claudia Webb asked, unimpressed.

"Not personally. But he'll know me. Unless he's been up to his eyeballs in his own formaldehyde the last twenty years. Snorting his own ether, or something. He'll know me, all right."

"What do you want me to ask him exactly?"

"I want to know what made that dent in my corpse's head. I want his best guess on that. If he won't make a guess, I want to know everything about that injury, an' I want it detailed right down to which hair on the guy's head was bent which way. Tell him that. And keep telling him. Start now."

"It's my lunch hour, just beginning. I eat my egg salad sandwich now."

"You can't call and eat at the same time?"

"I don't like to. It stops my digestion."

"Listen, girly, we sent a cold, dead one down there to the city lab. It may not get any colder or deader while you eat your lunch, but the case will, I can tell you that much. So make the calls. I want answers. You can eat two egg salad sandwiches tomorrow. I'll let you."

"But—"

"The name is Butts, remember? With an s on the end. Start calling."

"But—"

"And I want everything you can give me on those Ponemah and Willow Island killings." He went back into his office and shut the door.

At Wilmer's insistence, Pete stopped the truck on North

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Boundary Road and they hiked the rest of the way to Back Street. If Pete was intent on breaking the law, Wilmer said, there was no point drawing attention to the fact by leaving their vehicle standing in front of the place like an advertisement.

The house stood by itself in the moonlight, all the color washed out of it, shadows crisp and black. The three men stopped at the edge of the lot and stared at it. It didn't look welcoming.

"I dunno about this," Wilmer said.

Pete squinched his eyebrows. "What don't you know?"

"I don't know—I'm not sure if this is such a good idea."

"You already said that."

"Well now I'm even less sure."

"And waiting till Wove gets strung up from a lamp post by the End of Main Lady's Auxiliary is a good idea? Or thrown in prison for the rest of his life, which wouldn't be for all that long, I'll admit, the number he's been doing on his liver every day the last twenty years or so. But we're committed to this. Come on."

Pete went first up the narrow path. Reluctantly, Wilmer followed, and the Wove fell in behind him. The weeds crowded them, higher than their knees. And at the porch, there was police tape, the yellow looking almost gray in the moonlight, stretched from one rusted iron handrail to another across the front step. Pete squeezed under it, Wilmer and Wolverton followed, and they stood bunched together at the front door.

"There's not even a sign saying 'Don't enter'," Pete said, "only that dumb tape."

"This here's a new lock, though," Wilmer pointed out, directing their attention to a shiny new hasp and padlock fixed to the door and the jamb.

"Crap," Pete said. "Now what! Is there any other way into this place? What about around the back?"

"You really want to go back there?"

"Damn right, I do!"

Wilmer rolled his eyes.

There was a second path, leading round to the back, a well-trodden one. Trampled there through the weeds, no doubt, by End of Main kids acting on a dare, and then more recently, Chief Butts and whoever else. The back of the house was on the north side, and there was no moonlight there, but they could see that they weren't going to get into the place through this door either, realized that right away, just as soon as they saw the boards nailed across it.

"Now what?" Wilmer said.

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Pete's eyes caught the light. "You're asking me?"

Wolverton tapped Wilmer on the arm. He was pointing to the corner of the house—not the corner they had just walked around but the far, weedy, overgrown corner, where shrubs and trees had taken root and now all but blocked that part of the house from view. Wolverton stepped off the stoop and, choosing his spot carefully, drew back a leafy branch to expose a cellar window with a square of plywood fitted across it. He put his fingernails under the plywood, tugged in a precise way, and it popped out, leaving a stark, black hole in the masonry.

"You *have* been here before," Pete complained. "You lied!"

Wolverton shrugged.

They all managed to fit through the hole, Wilmer having to be almost dragged, and Pete encountering the most trouble, his beer gut proving to be a problem. But in a couple of minutes they were all in the cellar. Wilmer shone the flashlight around.

There was a dirt floor, a lot of garbage strewn about. Pete reached for Wilmer's arm and directed the beam of the light on one corner, where they could see beer cans, old damp newspapers, and the glint of something hard and reflective.

"Needles," Pete said. "The druggies come here."

"You mean drug addicts?" Wilmer breathed. "You really think so?"

Pete looked at him. "No. What I really think is, it's probably your diabetics. I think they gather here once a week for a social evening, have a few drinks, dance, hang out, and enjoy the surroundings." He glared. "Are you dumb on purpose, or just what?"

He turned with a snort and followed Wolverton, who was already climbing the cellar stairs.

Up on the main floor there was more of the same: refuse and rubbish everywhere. "Watch where you put your feet," Pete said. "You don't want to get stabbed by a needle, catch something, and die."

Wilmer picked his way even more carefully. "It stinks in here," he said, wrinkling his nose. "Smells like—I dunno—a buncha stinky things."

"Yeah, well, you and Wove are here now, aren't you?" Pete stopped in the middle of the living room. "Okay," he said, turning to glare at Wolverton, "when I asked you for the facts, you said there could of been something. So what was it? Lay it out for me. And where were you exactly when this happened?"

Wolverton rubbed his small, bald head with the tips of his fingers, giving the question some quiet consideration. He shuffled closer to Wilmer and began whispering. Wilmer listened, nodded

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a few times, then said to Pete, "The Wove says there might have been a row, some sort of argument in here."

"The mighty Wolverton," Pete said. "Everything is *might* with him."

"He says an hour or so before those kids came into the place he was here in this room. And he heard voices, guys' voices, two people under the window somewhere at the front of the house. He heard them pretty good, kind of arguing. When he heard footsteps on the porch and realized they were coming inside, he went up the stairs and parked himself in one of the bedrooms—there's two of 'em up there."

"Geez," said Pete, "all this and he only thought he might of been inside the house."

Wilmer was still translating. "There was a loud sort of wrenching sound, like probably the front lock being busted off, and they came in. They started arguing even louder once they got inside the place." Wilmer took a breath, then continued, listening and talking. "He heard feet clumping, like the guys might be throwing themselves around a bit, gruff voices hollering, and then it was quiet. The Wove didn't want to move for awhile, in case somebody was still down there, and then a couple of minutes later he heard the kids arrive. He heard screaming, came down, saw a chubby kid squeezing himself out the door. Then he spotted the dead guy lying there, didn't like it much, and went out of the house himself."

"So," Pete said to Wolverton, "you did see the dead body. If it was dead at that exact moment. We'll assume it was. What killed the guy? Could you tell? Did he have stab wounds, an arrow sticking out of him—what?"

Wilmer listened and grimaced. He said to Pete, "His head was, you know, bashed in."

"Geez. And did you tell all this to Butts?"

Wolverton mumbled; Wilmer translated.

"He didn't tell Butts nothing. He don't like Chief Butts."

"We agree on something, then," Pete said.

Robideau sat at one of the outdoor tables at the Dairy Queen across the street from the public safety building, and talked to Claudia Webb on his cell.

"Chief!" she said, her voice brightening right away. "So where are you calling from? Some beach in Florida, down there with all the other retired policemen?"

"No dear, listen. I'm sitting right across the street."

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"Well, come on over, I'll make a fresh pot of coffee—"

"No. Maybe some other time. But I'd like to test your memory about a case we had some years ago—"

"Is this about the murder? Come and look at the files."

"No. That wouldn't be right. I'm supposed to be retired, those are Chief Butts's files now."

"You put together those files."

"Yes, but they belong to the office there. What you can do for me, though, is take a glance through them, and see what you can find out about a guy named Grace, or maybe Case, something like that, back about ten years ago—"

"Chase?"

"That's the guy. What a memory you've got! Anyway, seems to me that character had a relative up near Riverton, an older sister maybe, or an aunt—"

He paused, hearing the rustle of paper on the line.

"I got the file in front of me now," Claudia said. He heard her flipping the pages. "It was his mother. A Mrs. Marylou Chase. Retired nurse. Lives in a cottage near Spruce Island—or at least, she used to. Hold on, the address should be here somewhere—right, I got it. Number 4, Chickadee Lane."

"Thanks, Claudia."

"But wait. Why do you want to know? Are you—you know—back in the saddle, Chief?"

"Just poking around. And Butts is the chief now, Claudia. I'm retired, remember? So I never called you, right? I never asked you for anything. And I wouldn't." He said, "Listen, that Mrs. Chase doesn't have a telephone number printed there, does she?"

Back at the Interlake, Pete was more determined than ever to drag the facts out of Wolverton, find some useful tidbit, *any*thing that would make their visit to Back Street something other than a complete waste of time. "You were there," he reminded Wove, "when the murderer came in. You were there when he left. Don't say to me you got nothing more to tell us. There's something, all right. Something you're not remembering, or something you're holding back, and by God, I hope it isn't that, on account of we're doing all this for your benefit, keep you out of the slammer, keep you out of the penitentiary, for crying out loud, where I don't think you'd be grinning and smiling too much, spending the next fifteen to twenty years under a roof with the Posse and the Sharps, all those gang members there for your roommates."

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"Go easy on him," Wilmer said, pushing a beer in front of the Wove. "He's been through a traumatic experience. A guy murdered right under his nose. Then hauled in for interrogation by the local chief of police."

"I'm surprised, under that nose, the murderer could of got a decent swing at the guy," Pete growled. "And as for interrogation, I doubt if Butts could even spell it."

"Can you?"

"No, but I don't have to."

They watched Wolverton thrust his big, beakish snout over the mug of beer.

Pete said, "All's I'm asking, all's I'm trying to do, is get a little information out of this guy. For his own good. If I'm outta line, let me know. If I should go ask somebody else, then tell me. Like maybe that guy over there by the cigarette machine. The one with the face. He looks like he could tell me about as much as Wolverton has so far. By which I mean practically nothing. Nothing useful, anyway. But that other guy, there's always a chance, might possibly *guess* at something, come close, like within a hundred miles or so, and that'd be a start at least, a whole lot better than we're doin' now."

Wilmer gently patted Wolverton's sloping shoulder.

"He's getting cranky, Wove. Is there anything more you can tell us?"

Wolverton kept drinking, his large Adam's apple going up and down, his small, close-set eyes watching Pete warily over the rim of the mug as if he expected, at any minute, to have the beer snatched out of his hands.

Then he stopped. Sat there a moment with the mug still pressed to his lips. He slowly lowered it and mumbled something.

"What's that?" Pete demanded. "What'd he say?"

"He says there might of been something else."

"There might of! Why am I not surprised?"

"He's been thinking about it, and he believes now," Wilmer continued, listening, "that one of 'em might of had a hearing aid."

"How in the hell could he know that, hiding up there in the friggin' attic?"

"He says it was quiet. The house was dead quiet, pardon the expression. And after they were in, he started to hear, every once in a while, a whistling sound—his mom used to have a hearing aid—and he remembers one of the voices saying, 'Can't you do something about that thing, turn it down or something?' Wove remembers that."

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Pete snorted. "Well, I guess that's something more than we had before. But I'm not gonna cheer just yet, on account of a hearing aid is not the rarest of things nowadays, all us baby boomers crowding sixty, spent hundreds of hours listening to Hendrix records, going to rock concerts an' standing right in front of the speakers. Yeah. That narrows it down a bit."

"It's a clue, though, isn't it?"

"I just said so, didn't I? Only it'd be nice if there was something else. What other revelations has this guy got bottled up inside himself?"

"Geez, you're never satisfied." Wilmer leaned forward on his elbows, fingers of his right hand digging into his left arm. "Well, Wove, you got anything else?"

The Wove finished draining his glass. He sat with his shoulders hunched, staring down at it, slowly rotating it between his fingers, making rings on the tabletop.

"He's thinking," Wilmer explained to Pete.

"Really. How much time should we give him? Come on back in a week or so? Or do you think a coupla days'll do it?"

Wilmer tipped his head to one side.

The Wove went on turning the beer glass, staring into it as if it were a crystal ball, as if things were written there in the cords of foam, things that only a guy like himself could see. Then he sat back and dropped his hands in his lap. And he muttered something.

"There," Pete said quickly, "what's that he's saying?"

Wilmer shushed him, listening. The Wove went on for a longish time. Then Wilmer nodded his head and turned to Pete.

"What he says—and he's pretty sure of this—the person that died looked like they'd been whacked in the head."

Pete sat bolt upright. "What's he telling us now? That he actually inspected the corpus dilecti? Actually *examined* it? After all this time letting on that he doesn't really know nothing, he only might know, maybe possibly, on the very outside of things, could know a couple facts? And I'm tryin' to help this guy when I could be having a grand old time slapping new pads an' shoes onto my truck? Geez! I mean, *geez!*"

Wilmer looked injured on the Wove's behalf. "Settle down, will you? We wanted answers, and now we're getting them. He's starting to remember things, that's all. You should be happy about it, not snarling and bellyaching!"

Pete suddenly sat up straighter. He snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute. How do we know the dead guy—the victim—wasn't the one with the hearing aid?"

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Wolverton said something.

"He knows it wasn't the dead guy," Wilmer said.

"How does he know?"

"He looked close at the body when he saw it in the kitchen. And he didn't see any hearing aid on him. So it had to of been the other guy wearing it."

Pete shook his head.

Wilmer said, "So listen. We need to find out who uses hearing aids. The ones here in End of Main wearing them, we already know some of them. But I think, you know, it makes sense to start at Willow Island, where the first guy got killed."

So they chipped in ten dollars for gas for Pete's old truck and rolled on down Highway 8 to see what they could find out.

At one time you could have counted the locals who lived on Willow Island on your fingers and toes, only pulling one sock off. Now there was a lakeshore development, the whole shoreline dredged out to form a network of canals, big cottages, and year-round homes on large lots only a dentist or drug dealer could afford.

"Whadda we do now we're here?" Pete wanted to know, pulling onto the shoulder, worn brakes shrieking, to survey the rows of fancy homes. "Knock on every door, tell 'em we're selling hearing aid batteries? Or maybe offer to polish their Beamers and see if they got trouble hearing us?"

"I don't see any BMWs," Wilmer said. "And I don't think the house-to-house approach is the way to handle this. A better idea, we should go back to that tavern we saw up the road, ask questions, see what we can find out from the guy that runs the place."

The tavern was called the Blue Otter. The sign that said so swung above the door in the breeze coming off the lake, making a loud, tinny creaking sound. There was one guy in the room, reading a newspaper. They ordered beer. The guy stopped reading and brought it to them—barman and waiter all in one. They stared at his ears: nothing visible there.

"You guys from around here?" he asked. "I never seen you in here before. Up from the city, maybe, gonna do some fishing?" He stepped back behind the bar, which looked like it had been carved from a single giant hunk of weathered driftwood, all gnarled. The barman leaned his arms on it and smiled.

It was the kind of prying introduction Pete would normally have dealt with acidly, but they were after something here: information.

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"What we are," Pete said, after a slow, deep breath, "we're here on business. What we do, see, we sell hearing aids."

"Hearing aids!"

"That's right."

"Well, no kidding." The barman looked skeptically at each of them in turn. "Must be those really heavy ones. Three strong guys to wheel them in and out."

Pete flushed, but held his temper.

"It's a business. My friends here might want to buy into it."

"I might want to buy into it," the barman said. "Something to do in the off-season when the bar business isn't so good."

"Your business can't be too terrible," Wilmer said, "all those big homes and cottages out there on the lake."

"Summer people," the barman said. "Lot of 'em bring their own booze with them, pack it in with the Oreo cookies. And that's not all they bring. Used to be you could leave your door unlocked year round here. But when they put in this development, that changed in a hurry. Lot of those city kids, the older ones, are trouble."

"You talking about the murder you had?" Wilmer asked offhandedly, spotting an opening.

"I'm talking about that, but more especially the substance abuse been going on around here since the development went up. I sell booze, not substances."

"Any likely hearing aid customers?" Wilmer asked, steering him back to the topic.

The barman's eyes narrowed. "You're serious, aren't you?" He thought a minute. "Well, there's maybe three people I know of who wear hearing aids. But those aren't something you buy every week or two, are they?"

"There's money in servicing," Wilmer said. "Repairs. Batteries. People always need batteries."

"I guess batteries don't last long in those giant hearing aids you sell," the barman said, suddenly a comedian again. "They'd have to be big, too. Size of car batteries. How does it work, your customers haul their batteries around on a handcart, big thick cables to power 'em up?"

Pete's breath was sounding more and more ragged, a danger sign that Wilmer quickly recognized. Pete said, "You're a pretty funny guy."

Wilmer said, "You want to tell us where we can find these people that you mentioned, or not?"

"Two of 'em, I dunno, they're city folks. I can maybe tell you where to find one of them, though . . ."

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"Think you could do that for us?" Wilmer said, kicking Pete under the table.

Claudia Webb tapped on Chief Butts's door and put her head into the room. "Dr. Gillies phoned. I mean, his office did."

"Fine," Butts growled. "What've they got?"

"They say the wound might of been made by some sort of tool. Something with the weight of a tire iron, they said, or any small iron bar. One with a blunt, rounded edge on it."

"A rounded edge."

"That's what they said."

"An iron bar," Butts mused, tilting back in his chair, "with a rounded edge. Well, now, lemme just see. How about a tire iron. Wouldn't that do it? The same one they used to break the lock off the front door."

"I got no idea," Claudia Webb said.

But the chief did. He had a very good idea. And he liked it. It had a nice, solid, obvious believability to it. He had the victim's wallet lying open in front of him, and now he picked it up, folded it, and slipped it into his pocket.

Following the barman's instructions, Pete turned east and drove until they could see the gray of the lake lifting against the sky.

"That guy has got a lousy attitude," Pete said. "No wonder his bar's empty."

Wolverton muttered a comment into Wilmer's ear.

"The Wove says he isn't one of the guys," Wilmer said. "Not one of the guys he heard downstairs in the house."

Pete rolled his eyes.

The woman, when they found her, was sweeping the walk at the narrow front of her little laundromat. Pete swung the truck in nose-first to the sidewalk, they all got out, and Pete said to her loudly, "You Mrs. Deets?"

A tire iron—that had a nice, solid, obvious believability to it.

She sent a last flurry of leaves skittering into the gutter, then leaned her broom against the wall by the door. She looked formidable, with a boxer's jaw, going maybe two-ten at ringside, short dyed-blonde hair swept back from her ears, a hearing aid showing plainly. She said, "I'm not deaf, you know."

"We know," Wilmer said, stepping in front of Pete with his best

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smile. "We're looking for a guy wears a hearing aid, and we thought you might know him, that's all."

"You mean 'cause I got one myself?" She snorted. "Bad reasoning. Your friend there—" She glared at Pete. "—has an attitude. Can he tell me who else does?"

"I think maybe you do," Pete mumbled, but Wilmer spoke right over him.

"It's a guy, see, we . . . uh . . . owe him money. And we want to pay him but we got to find him first. Only we don't really know what he looks like—only that he wears a hearing aid."

"Not many of us around here," the woman said, relenting. "Only two or three, actually." Her frown deepened. "Had a customer, though—didn't recognize the guy—passing through from somewhere else. He wore one."

She suddenly had their attention.

"You mean recently?" Wilmer asked.

"That's right. Two, three days ago. Had his clothes in a big black garbage bag, washed them up and left. I had to give him hell, caught him kicking one of my machines, said it ate his coins. But they always say that, you know, these drifters. Anything to weasel a refund outta you."

"What did he look like?"

"Tall, with long dark hair—a rangy-looking guy. Blue sweatshirt, jeans. Not young—had these lines around his mouth. Mean. You could tell."

"What kinda car did he drive?" Wilmer asked.

As they drove west, back toward the highway, Wilmer said, "Well, that was lucky. This could actually be the guy we're looking for."

Pete said, "Well, let's see. Mean-looking, a drifter, violent, tried to bust a machine. *And* wears a hearing aid. No. No, I don't think so. I think that barkeeper's our man. I'd like to see him go for a twenty-year ride."

"Be serious," Wilmer said. "And keep your eyes peeled for that orange van she described. Shouldn't be hard to spot if it's still around here. Stand out like a—"

He stopped in mid-sentence, pointing at a vehicle beetling toward them on the other side of Center Street, an old minivan, flat-fronted, with a split windshield, it looked twenty years old if it was a day. It hammered past.

"Hey," Wilmer said, "that was him! Hurry up and turn around!"

Pete hurried. He got them turned. For a few anxious minutes

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they thought they'd lost the vehicle, then they all saw it at the same time, a flash of orange a mile ahead of them, just turning north onto Highway 8. Pete pushed the gas pedal down.

Robideau sat in the small, sunny sitting room with a pool of sunshine at his feet. A cat lay half in, half out of the patch of sun. In a glider-rocker facing him, a tall heavy woman in her late forties watched him distrustfully over a cup of tea balanced in her lap. She wore her gray hair in a dated style—full, and fluffed out around her neck.

"That was a very long time ago, Chief—er, Mr. Robideau."

"Yes, it was a long time ago, Mrs. Chase. And I don't want to upset you about it. But I need to find Cody. Talk to him. There are some things I want to ask him." Robideau gave a small movement of his shoulders. "Where is he, Mrs. Chase?"

"He isn't here."

"That's not what I asked you."

"I don't know where he is."

Robideau sat there looking at her. He'd learned one thing: Cody Chase must have been released, the way she was talking. Now, what was it—ten, eleven years since the trial? A verdict of guilty with extenuating circumstances, Cody to be confined at the Lakeside Psychiatric Hospital and receive treatment for an undetermined period. At the time there had been arguments that the sentence was too lenient. Apologists argued that consignment to that institution was tougher than a prison sentence because the length of it could drag on much longer than the usual fifteen to twenty-five years. So much for the apologists.

"Has he tried to contact you?"

She moved in her chair. Began to rock almost imperceptibly.

"If he's contacted you, I think you should tell me," Robideau said.

"I suppose that would that surprise you? A boy wanting to talk to his mother after all these years?"

"No, it wouldn't," Robideau said. "It wouldn't surprise me at all. That's why I'm here."

"Well, I just told you, I haven't seen him."

"You live here alone, Mrs. Chase?"

"Yes, I do."

"Those are very large gym shoes by the door where I came in. Too large for you, I think."

Her head suddenly swiveled toward the entrance. She looked at the mat by the door, the shoes on it, and faced him again.

"Those shoes have been there for eleven years. I never put away

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anything of his. I couldn't. I was too cut up inside. I still am." Her voice grew harsher. "Why'd you go and pick on Cody? You fixed on him and you went after him. There were those other boys, the ones sold him drugs. That's what started it all. Made him go after money—that burglary." She leaned forward sharply. "If he was guilty, so were they, but their mothers never went through what I went through!"

Robideau couldn't argue. There was truth in what she said. But the system worked only one way. He had tried to explain it to her at the time.

"There had to be evidence, Mrs. Chase. We could only use what we could prove." But he wasn't here to begin that discussion again. "Help me find Cody, Mrs. Chase. I'm sure you don't want him to get into any more trouble."

"What do you care? You're not the chief of police. Not anymore, you're not. There's a new one." Her eyes squinted. "Why are you here and not him?"

"Because he doesn't know what I know. I have a long memory."

"And if you don't find Cody . . ."

"Then I'll give what I know to Chief Butts. Let him deal with it."

The chair was moving now, creaking back and forth. She hadn't touched her tea, it was growing cold in her lap. The cat got up, stretched, pressing its claws into the nap of the carpet, then sidled away into the kitchen with its tail pointing straight up. Mrs. Chase continued to look at Robideau, something working behind those flat gray eyes.

Finally she said, "All right. You want to talk to him, I'll arrange something. But it's not going to be here."

"Where then?"

"At a place where nobody's going to trap him. I'll call and tell you where at the last minute."

Pete steered the truck onto the shoulder and stopped it by pumping the brakes several times. He tipped his head back and said, "Damn!" Even in what was left of the afternoon sun, the flash of the blue Maglight on top of the car behind them came and went, came and went, on the dash.

Butts's face appeared at the driver's window.

"I'm gonna get the vehicle up to spec," Pete said. "I'm workin' on it—"

"Save it for someone who cares," Butts told him. "It's him I want." Pushing his chin at Wolverton. "Would you step out of the vehicle, please?"

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Pete blinked. He said, "Chief, we got a line on who might of done that murder, he's—" He lifted his hand to point, but the orange van was a disappearing speck on the next bend in the road.

"My goodness, what's this?" Butts dipped his hand into the bed of the truck and came out with Pete's tire iron.

"That's mine," Pete said.

"Sure," Butts said, "but lying in the truck, anybody could of borrowed it, right?"

"You're not serious," Pete said, taking his meaning. "You won't find any blood from the corpse on that thing."

"You'd be surprised what I can find when I put my mind to it." Butts grinned wickedly. He patted Wolverton down and seemed to find something, held it up in the air for a moment. Then, taking the tire iron with him, Butts frog-marched Wolverton to the police car, shoved him into the back, and slammed the door.

"Wait a minute," Pete said, jumping down onto the shoulder of the road. "What did you find there on him?"

"Oh, nothing too important, my friend," Butts told him. "Only a wallet with the personal papers of the deceased in it—not on the body when I searched it. First the flashlight and now this. How'd your pal come by such a thing?"

"That's impossible!" Pete snapped. "I don't believe it!"

Butts looked ugly and stepped forward and put his face up close to Pete's. "I don't much care what you believe. It's what the jury's gonna believe that matters."

Watching the chief's car drive off, Wilmer said, "What we got to do is find Robideau. Where d'you suppose he'd be?"

Robideau sat in his car and gazed at the house. Set back deep on its lot, shrouded in shadow, the light from the street lamps barely able to penetrate the bristling foliage that surrounded it. Only one front shoulder of the place stood out clearly, and most of the porch; the rest was obscured. He noticed that the police tape had been removed; apparently Butts was finished here. Robideau reached into the glove box and brought out a small flashlight. Snapped it on, then off, and slipped it into his pocket. Mrs. Chase had said one A.M. It was nearly that now. There were no other vehicles on the road, but of course Cody Chase could have been dropped off here earlier, or he could have left a vehicle a few streets away.

Robideau got out of the car and crossed the road, his shoes crunching on the loose surface. At the broken-down gate he

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stopped. It was completely calm, not a breath of wind in the trees. He glanced up the road toward the highway where a row of enormous spruces drew a jagged line against a starlit sky. Nothing moved there. He turned to look back the other way, but there was only the bend in the road. It was eerily silent.

He stepped through the gate and went up the walkway to the steps of the porch. He could see without climbing the steps that a brand new padlock had been pried away from the door, hasp and all, the shiny steel reflecting the starlight, sagging at an angle against weathered wood.

"Butts won't like that," he thought.

He climbed the steps and pushed on the door. He had to lean his weight on it to get it partway open. Broad scrapes on the old vinyl flooring showed where it met a lifting floor. They probably had to take the door completely off to get the body out.

Robideau stepped inside. The place smelled bad. A place where terrible violence had been done, once years ago and now again. He took shallow breaths and flicked his light on.

"Cody?" he said. "Cody Chase?"

No answer. It was now three minutes past one. This wasn't shaping up too good.

He stepped cautiously over some litter, put his head into the living room and shone the light around. More trash—yellowed newspapers, broken liquor bottles, an old stained and torn blanket. There was a short hallway to the back of the house, which he followed to a flight of stairs leading upwards. Beside it a door stood partly open, revealing steps that sloped down to an inky basement.

"Cody?" he said.

Nothing.

Should he go upstairs or down? He wasn't all that keen on going down into the basement; maybe he would check the upstairs first. He was about to start up the stairs when he heard a high, shrill, whistling sound.

He hesitated, head tipped to one side, listening. It was a familiar sound. He felt he ought to know what it was. He couldn't be sure if it had come from the front of the house, the basement, or the upstairs, but it was definitely inside, not something out in the street.

"Cody?"

He started to climb. His shoes sounded hollow on the steps. The old wood groaned like something out of a horror movie. If the kid was here, why didn't he answer? But then he was a strange one.

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Robideau remembered his sharp blue eyes, recalled looking into them and not seeing anything there he recognized. In the interrogation room, there had been moments when Robideau suddenly realized that the kid wasn't even listening, that he was somewhere else—maybe reliving his crime. It had been easy to believe he was capable of killing the old couple here during that burglary. But the mother hadn't seen it. She'd argued and fought for her son like a madwoman, seeming to go from strength to strength. And then, as soon as the verdict was read—click!—like turning off a lamp, the fight had gone out of her. She'd slipped into that same empty-eyed stupor herself. Silently watched them lead her son out of the room in chains, and then went home to her glider rocker and her cat.

A terrible thing to see your child convicted of a crime and then taken away from you. Robideau couldn't imagine it.

He reached the upstairs landing and shone his torch around. There were two littered bedrooms. He carefully inspected each of them.

Nothing.

Nobody.

So obviously this trip was a washout. Clearly he was wasting his time. He turned to retrace his steps.

And stopped. There was somebody standing right at the top of the stairs. The face moved with shadows in the shifting glow of the little torch. He raised the beam—and something struck him across the head. There was an instant of brilliant pain. He went down on one knee, sensed another blow coming, and raised his arm to protect himself. He thought he heard feet thundering up the stairs, and then everything dissolved into winking lights.

When he opened his eyes a few seconds later, he heard strangely familiar voices.

"Hope I didn't hurt anybody," Pete said.

"You didn't do anybody any good," Wilmer told him.

"Help me with the chief."

They raised Robideau, propped him up so that he was half lying, half sitting, with his back against the wall by the door. The chief peered blearily at them with eyes that were half shut. He was vaguely aware of another person lying stretched out on the floor a few inches away.

"You okay, Chief?" Pete was saying, crouching over him.

Robideau tried to nod. It wasn't a good idea. "Great. Just great. Am I going to live?"

"Looks like it," Pete said, "no thanks to this jaboney." He rose and

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shone Robideau's flashlight on the person at their feet. "He smacked you a good one, Chief."

Robideau said in a half whisper, "I'm not the chief anymore . . . I keep telling people . . ."

But Pete was aiming the light at the wall. "Something I noticed here," he said, "what the hell is *that?*"

There was a spot on the floor swept clear of litter. On the boards lay a hypodermic needle—not one of the crushed, abandoned syringes scattered here and there in the room, but one carefully laid out for use on a square, white cloth next to a tiny bottle.

"That wasn't here last time we came," Pete said. He stepped forward and squinted down at it. "You know what, Chief? I think this guy was going to stick something into you."

"It isn't a guy," Wilmer said. He was crouching over the prostrate form.

Robideau hiked himself up on his elbow for a better look.

The person on the floor was Mrs. Chase.

They sat around the warm, friendly Robideau kitchen watching Mrs. Robideau putter back and forth, boiling water, making tea. Pete Melynchuk's eyes followed her carefully, as if he were weighing the advisability of consuming such a concoction; Wilmer and the Wove were more relaxed, willing to try anything once.

"Good thing we didn't catch up with the guy in the orange van," Wilmer said. "That could of been embarrassing."

"So what was it she was going to stick you with, the stuff in that hypodermic needle?" Mrs. Robideau asked her husband.

She brought the teapot to the table and poured them each a cup, then set out a plate of oatmeal cookies, which Wilmer and Wolverton lunged at.

"It'll have to be analyzed," Robideau said, reaching for a cookie himself, deliberating a moment, then selecting one. "But apparently, according to what Butts found out, that was a very unpleasant stimulant she brought with her in that tiny bottle. It would have been unpleasant for me, I mean."

"Why would she do such a thing?"

"She blamed me, I guess, for what her son went through at the hospital."

Pete said, "So you were on her hit list too?"

"No. I don't think so. Most likely my visit got her thinking—made her remember my role in the whole thing. And I told her I

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would take what I knew to Butts. She wasn't about to let that happen and be separated from her son again."

"Where does *he* figure into all of this?" Mrs. Robideau asked.

"He doesn't, it turns out. It was all Mrs. Chase, trying—in her strange way—to keep from losing him again."

Wilmer was still thinking about the syringe. "Where'd she get the stuff?"

Robideau shrugged. "When you're a nurse most of your life there are plenty of opportunities to pinch such things. There's a cabinet at her house, apparently, filled with prescription drugs. She had a fascination with medicines."

"Sounds like her son came by his drug habit honestly, growing up in a home like that," Mrs. Robideau said disapprovingly.

"Maybe he did. Anyway, she must have been one of the people Wolverton heard downstairs that day. It wasn't two guys, there. It was her and the victim."

"She does have a gruff voice."

"And she now wears a hearing aid. I didn't notice it the day I visited her, she keeps her hair full at the sides." Robideau sipped his hot tea cautiously; the dressing on his scalp moved upward as he lifted his eyebrows. "When she's keyed up, she has the habit of fooling with it. Pulling it out, adjusting it, slipping it back into place again. It feeds back and makes that whistling sound—the sound Wolverton heard down in the kitchen that day, and that I heard myself before I climbed those stairs."

"And it really was her that knocked off those other two—the guy in Ponemah, the guy at Willow Island?" Pete asked.

"Looks like it. I think she saw them trying to hook up with her son again. She took care of two of them, then lured the third one out to the house on Back Street—probably with an offer of drugs—and clobbered him in the kitchen. The tire iron from her car has been scrubbed clean, actually disinfected. Now who is that meticulous about their tools?"

"She's pretty good at clobbering," Wilmer said. "You were lucky."

"I don't know. Apparently she had a more interesting fate in mind for me." Gingerly he touched the dressing on his head. "My luck was in having you guys show up when you did."

"We wanted your advice after the Wove got arrested," Wilmer said. "Mrs. Robideau—" she smiled back pleasantly "—told us you were out investigating the murders. We went out to the house on Back Street because we didn't know where else to look."

"And what about that Butts," Pete said, "trying to set Wolverton

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up? He planted that wallet—and I bet he was going to doctor up my tire iron."

Robideau sighed. "We'll give him the benefit of the doubt. He believed he was on the right track."

"Sure. Like that's a reason to frame someone!"

Robideau held up his hands. "I'm not defending him, only pointing out his logic."

Unmollified, Pete sat there scowling. "We need you back there in that job."

"I'm retired."

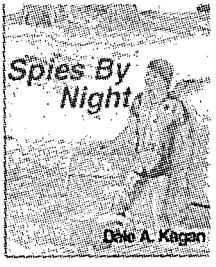
"Right."

Mrs. Robideau said from the kitchen window, "Pete, is that your truck rolling backwards down the drive?"

Pete left his chair and ran out of the room. They got up to watch him out the living room window. Catching up with the vehicle, hopping behind the wheel, pumping the brakes.

"When did he last do a safety on that thing?" Robideau asked, with his brows pulled down.

"There you go forgetting to be retired again," Mrs. Robideau said.



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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

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The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Boneyard

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

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A Bad Day for Pink and Yellow Shirts

ROBERT LOPRESTI

Sergeant Shiffey caught up with the suspect about half a mile from the car crash. He was feeling pretty good about having run that far. Captain Winter was always chewing him out about his weight but, by gosh, he had chased this skinny punk in the blue suit all this way and caught him. Of course, it helped that most of the trip had been downhill.

Shiffey crashed into the suspect and they tumbled to the road. He heard the skinny guy gasping for breath under him. Ha! All that weight was good for something.

"You—you—oh, man." Shiffey was panting as hard as the clown beneath him. "You are under arrest, jerk."

The suspect tried to look up at him, which wasn't possible for a man lying face down on the asphalt. "Arrest? What are you talking about?"

"Resisting—uh. Resisting arrest. And leaving the—oof—scene of an accident." This was embarrassing; he sounded like a beached whale.

"Of *course* I left the scene of an accident. You pulled a *gun* on me. What are those, handcuffs? My gosh, are you really a cop?"

"Darn right I am. Sergeant Shiffey of the Brune County Police." He locked the cuffs in place, slid his weight off the other man, and slowly stood up. "And you, my friend, are in a world of trouble."

"Hey, I had no idea you were a cop. You're not in uniform. And that was an unmarked car."

"You mean the one you hit? That's my *personal* car."

The suspect was struggling to his feet, no easy trick in handcuffs. "You hit me!"

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"Of course I did. That's what happens when you go through a stop sign."

"There wasn't any stop sign."

Shiffey laughed. "Oh, yes there was, pal. And you went right through it."

The suspect seemed to be having a moment of self-doubt. Then he brightened. "Well, you sure as hell never said you were a cop. You waved your gun around, but not a badge. And you called me a bunch of names. But you never identified yourself."

Shiffey wet his lips. "Sure I did. I said, 'Stop! Police.' "

"No. You said 'Stop, jerk!' Then you said my mother was a—"

Shiffey wished the suspect would quit arguing. He was *positive* he had identified himself. Well, almost positive. He had been so mad about the damage to his car. "I definitely said I was a cop." This was giving him a headache.

"You definitely did *not*." The suspect was looking more confident. "Where's your badge?"

Where was it? It was hard to think with this throbbing pain in his skull. He had a feeling the badge was still in his glove compartment, which probably meant he hadn't identified himself. Oh, hell.

No point in showing weakness. He glared at the man. "Well listen, pal."

"Listen to what?" asked the suspect.

The headache slid into his chest and then all the way down his left arm. "Oh hell," the sergeant said, and fell face first onto the pavement. He thought, *Captain Winter is gonna kill me for this.*

Logan—the suspect—blinked. "Sergeant? Mr., uh, Shiffey? You okay?"

His hands were cuffed behind his back. Reluctantly, he nudged the prone policeman with one foot. When there was no reaction he pushed harder until he had shoved the big man onto his back.

Shiffey's face was turning blue. If he was breathing, Logan couldn't see it.

"Oh, great," he grumbled. He had never been in trouble before and, like most people, his knowledge of criminal law came from television. He remembered something called *felony murder,* which meant that if you were, say, robbing a liquor store, and the owner tripped on his own big feet and broke his skull, it was murder, just as if you shot the guy.

So if this cop Shiffey died of a heart attack from chasing Logan, was Logan guilty of felony murder? Was it a felony to run through a stop sign, if there had been one? Or to run away from a nut waving a gun and swearing?

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The cop was making hissing noises, like a tire deflating. It didn't sound good.

"Damn," said Logan. He sat on the pavement and struggled to get his arms in front of him. That meant stretching his handcuffed hands around his legs, which wasn't easy. He should have studied yoga. By the time he managed it he thought he was going to have a heart attack himself. Every muscle in his arms and legs hurt.

What a day. Two hours ago he had been in the country home of a new client, a well-known local businessman. Logan was thrilled that this guy wanted to work with him, thought it was a big breakthrough.

Turned out the businessman wanted his advice on how to cover up the fact that he had been siphoning company funds to pay for his mistress's acting lessons. Figured Logan was desperate enough for clients to accept the job with a smile.

And he had been right. Logan did need the business that badly. Unfortunately, while he was a good—okay, an adequate—public relations man, he could not walk on water. Turned out he couldn't make the blind see either, and the client had canned him for undue pessimism.

Now, struggling with handcuffs in the middle of a country road, Logan worked on being optimistic. He tried not to look at the cop's face as he dug through the big man's pockets for a key ring. "Boy, you have a lot of keys, Sergeant Shiffey. What do you have, three cars? On a cop's salary? Naughty, naughty."

He found the right key and struggled to fit it into the cuffs. The heck with yoga; he should have studied magic. This was a job for Houdini.

Ah. Got it. The cuffs came off and he rubbed his wrists, which were stiff and sore.

"Okay, Sergeant. It's been a few years since I took CPR, but let's see what I remember." He knelt down and started compressions. In class this had always seemed boring. Somehow it seemed a lot more interesting now.

Of course, CPR didn't restart a heart. It just kept blood and oxygen moving until someone with proper equipment arrived. He wondered how long that was going to—

Shiffey let out a cough loud enough to wake the dead.

Logan tumbled backwards and tore his best suit. "Well, all right! Must not have been a very bad heart attack, huh? Welcome home, Sergeant. Hello?"

Was he breathing? Hard to tell. "Damn." Just as he started

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compressions again Logan heard a siren coming down the hill. "The cavalry is coming, Sergeant. About time, too."

The car crash was the most bizarre thing Officer Kite had seen in five—well, between three and five years on the job. The exact number depended on how you counted all the time he had spent suspended. You might say Officer Kite was unlucky, or you might say he was not a very good cop. He preferred the former.

But even he knew there was something bizarre about two cars smashed together at a stop sign miles from anywhere, with no drivers in sight. Surely the cars hadn't gotten there on their *own*.

Kite called it in. Then he looked left, right, and straight ahead. If you were two drivers who had just crashed their cars, which way would you go?

The closest town was five miles to the left. All his instincts said the drivers would have turned left.

Kite turned right. Three to five years on the job had taught him that his instincts were lousy.

As he crossed the top of the hill he saw the most bizarre thing he'd ever seen—forget the car crash; this was much worse. There were two men down at the bottom of the hill, off on the right edge of the road. One was lying on his back and the other was hunched over him, pounding on the first guy's chest.

These had to be the drivers. One had beaten the other unconscious and was still clobbering the guy.

Officer Kite hit the siren. When he got closer he felt his hair stand on end.

My gosh, that was Shiffey! In civvies but unquestionably the sergeant, and he was the one on his back.

He grabbed the radio. "Officer down on Route 9, east of Mason Road. Send backup." *I'm gonna be a hero,* he thought.

When he was almost at the bottom of the hill, Kite slammed on the brakes. He jumped out of the car with his gun drawn and ran forward. As he neared the two men he swung into a perfect two-hand stance. The instructors back at the academy would have been proud of him.

"Police! Get away from him!"

The suspect looked up at him, wide eyed and startled. Then he shouted: "Look out!"

Before Officer Kite had time to wonder *Look out for what?* the patrol car hit him from behind and sent him flying.

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I'm being run over, he thought. *Gotta hold onto my gun or whoever's driving will finish me off.* And then there was too much pain to think because a rear tire went over his left shin and snapped it like a twig.

Logan watched in disbelief as the empty cop car finished rolling down the hill and hit a tree. Fortunately, it wasn't going fast enough to do much damage. The way his day had been going he had expected a fiery explosion.

He ran over to the new cop who was lying face down in the road, a stunned look on his face. "Are you okay?"

"Hell, no! My leg is broken!" Kite pointed his pistol at him, a bit unsteadily. "Keep away! And don't go near that gun!"

"What gun?" Logan looked over at Shiffey. He hadn't even noticed the sergeant's pistol lying in the street. "Look, Officer. Your buddy over there had a heart attack. I've been doing CPR."

Kite had a sick feeling that wasn't just from shock. "You—you were trying to save him?"

"Yeah. He chased me down the hill—I didn't know he was a cop—and then he went down. I was gonna ask if you had a portable defibrillator, but he started breathing on his own again just before you crashed your car. Forgot to put it in park, huh?"

"Damn. I guess you're right. I was only thinking about making you stop beating up Shiffey. Is he gonna be okay?"

"Well, he's not blue in the face anymore."

"Great." Kite was trying to ignore the pain and think.

Logan squatted down beside Kite. "You're not bleeding, so it must be a simple fracture. You want me to splint it or something?"

Kite shook his head. "Just take care of Shiffey. Backup is on the way." Assuming he had used the radio properly. This was not one of his better days. "Damn. I'm gonna get fired for this."

"The sergeant's turning pink. I think he's gonna be okay." Logan thought about what the cop had said. "Hey, anyone could make a mistake. They'll give you a second chance."

Kite laughed bitterly. "I think I'm up to about my *seventh* chance. How about you? What are you doing out in the boondocks with a collapsing cop?"

"Me? I'm a public relations consultant."

"A P.R. guy. Who do you work for?"

"Anybody with a publicity problem and enough money." Logan sighed. "Money. I wonder how much this is going to add to my insurance bill."

"Oh. You mean the accident back there was your fault."

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"Looks like it."

"Damn, my leg hurts." Kite grimaced. "Can you get disability leave if you run over yourself? Listen, pal. You're a spin doctor, right? Well, that's what I need right now, more than a medical doctor. In fact, all three of us could use a little public relations magic. Even Shiffey over there, if he survives, isn't gonna want to admit he had a heart attack chasing you. So start spinning." He lay back and closed his eyes, exhausted.

Logan scratched his head. The cop was right. He had to think of this situation as a P.R. job. One with a really short deadline.

He looked at the police car married to the tree. He looked at the big cop lying on his back at the bottom of the hill and the younger cop with the broken leg.

Okay. This might just be possible. "Huh. Maybe you'll get your eighth chance, Officer Kite."

The cop raised his head. "Yeah? You got an idea?"

"Yup." He gave what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Could I borrow your gun?"

"Mr. Logan?"

A tall, distinguished man in uniform walked down the hospital hall. "I'm Captain Winters. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"That's all right. How is the sergeant doing?"

"The doctors say he's out of the woods, thanks to you. I just want to go over our notes on this incident."

"Sure." Logan tried to look as open and honest as possible.

"So how did this carjacker get into your car?"

"Ah," said Logan. "I'm embarrassed about that. He was hitchhiking on Wilson Road, just outside of town."

Captain Winters tsked. "Picking up hitchhikers . . ."

"I know, Captain. Believe me, I've learned my lesson about that. Anyway, this fellow pulled a knife and told me to drive out into the country. I was pretty sure he was looking for a place to leave my body, if you know what I mean. But when we reached that intersection I saw a car on my left."

"Sergeant Shiffey."

"Yes, but of course I didn't know he was a cop. I just figured he was my only hope. When I got close enough to the intersection I turned my head so the hitchhiker couldn't see my face and I mouthed some words at him."

"Yeah? What did you say?"

Logan wracked his brain for an appropriate plea. "I think I said 'Help! He's a carjacker!' But the hitchhiker became suspicious. He

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nudged me with the knife and told me to go. I put the car into gear and that's when your sergeant saved my life. He smashed his car into mine and jumped out, pulling his gun."

"Did he identify himself as a police officer?"

"Oh, definitely," said Logan. "I remember that *vividly.* Then I jumped out on the driver's side and the hitchhiker climbed out the passenger side and ran down Route 9. The sergeant chased him. I followed, but at a distance, of course."

He shook his head. "You should have seen him, Captain. He caught the bad guy at the bottom of the hill and knocked him down. He had pulled out the handcuffs when the carjacker punched him hard in the chest and took off. The sergeant started to chase him, but then he grabbed his chest and fell over."

"The heart attack."

"I guess so. Anyway, the hitchhiker ran off—or so I thought. I went down to do CPR and that's when Officer Kite pulled up. I called him to come over and help, but when he was halfway there that darned hitchhiker came out of the woods and jumped into the prowl car."

Logan paused. "You know, it wasn't Officer Kite's fault that the guy did that. He had no reason to think someone was going to steal his prowl car."

Winters nodded. "He was following procedure. Go on."

"Right. The hitchhiker was headed right toward poor Sergeant Shiffey, lying on the side of the road. That's when Officer Kite threw himself in front of the car and fired at the driver."

Actually, Logan had put the bullet in the windshield, being careful that it lodged in the back seat. If it had gone out a window and hit, say, a tree, some smart investigator might have put the angles together and figured out where the prowl car was when the shot was fired.

Winters nodded. "He risked his own life to save you and the sergeant. Very commendable."

"Well, *I* certainly thought so. The car swerved and hit that tree. The carjacker jumped out and ran away. That's when I went to the patrol car and called for help again."

"I see," said Winters. "Well, that seems to clear it all up. One more question."

Logan took a deep breath.

"Let's make sure we have the description of the carjacker right. You say he was a white man, bald, in his fifties, shorter than average. And he was wearing a—let's see—pink and yellow shirt?"

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"That's right." Logan frowned, trying to remember the details he and Kite had agreed on. "Horizontal stripes."

Winters nodded and closed his notebook. "Well, we've put that description out on the radio. Shouldn't be too many people around who look like that."

None at all, I hope, Logan thought. "How is Officer Kite, by the way? I haven't seen him since they brought him in."

"Oh, he's going to be fine, Mr. Logan. I'll tell you frankly, he'll probably get a commendation for bravery out of this. And you know what he's doing now? Ever since they set his leg he's been sitting at Sergeant Shiffey's side. He says he wants to be the first one to talk to him when he wakes up."

I'll bet he does, Logan said, but only to himself. Out loud, he said, "Dedication to duty. It's a beautiful thing."

He was thinking that this was the best P.R. job he had ever done. What a shame he couldn't put it on his résumé.

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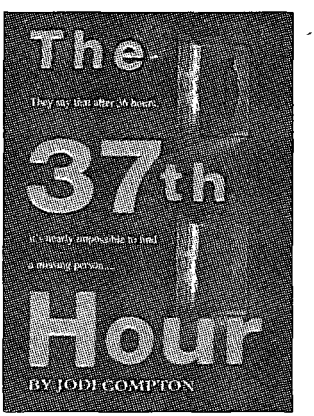
Booked & Printed

Robert C. Hahn

Four highly suspenseful novels—two from old pros—should keep reading lamps lit late into the night. Jonathan Kellerman, author of the best-selling Alex Delaware series, hits the charts again with the stand-alone thriller *The Conspiracy Club* featuring psychologist Jeremy Carrier. Edgar-winner Thomas H. Cook *(The Chatham School Affair)* spins a complex tale of disparate lives headed for an explosive collision in *Peril*. Paris-based author Jake Lamar evokes the world of expatriates living in the 18th Arrondissment in his new thriller, *Rendezvous Eighteenth*. And first-time novelist Jodi Compton introduces a heroine sure to be remembered long after *The 37th Hour* is finished.



THE 37TH HOUR (Delacorte, $21.95) introduces Sarah Pribek, a Hennepin County (Minneapolis) detective working missing person cases. Compton plunges the reader into her story with dramatic flair as Pribek gets an immediate opportunity to display both impulsiveness and heroism when confronting a suicidal teen. Then she introduces a harrowing back story about Pribek's partner Genevieve Brown and finally introduces Mike Shiloh, Pribek's husband of two months and a fellow cop who works cold cases.

In less than fifty pages Compton has introduced three complex characters, then she shifts into high gear when Shiloh disappears without a word or a trace. The irony is delicious: a missing person expert suddenly facing the problem from the other side and, initially, feeling almost as inadequate as those she usually tried to help. Shiloh, a loner with a background as a narcotics officer and in search-and-rescue operations, is scheduled to begin FBI training at Quantico. But he never arrives there and, as far as Pribek can determine, he never left Minneapolis either.

Knowing that the first thirty-six hours in a missing person case are crucial (hence the title), Pribek begins to treat her husband's disappearance as she would any other case and realizes just how little she knows of his past. From interviewing her own neighbors

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to tracking credit charges, to finding and interviewing Shiloh's scattered relatives, Pribek probes for both clues and understanding.

Compton has it all working beautifully as Pribek struggles with her search, tries to get her devastated partner back in harness to help her, and juggles personal and professional stresses. Suspense, surprises, and shocks combine to make Compton's debut thriller one that readers should quickly embrace as she proves to be a risk-taking author who operates without a safety net.

Thomas H. Cook has been spinning suspense yarns for almost a quarter-century now from 1980's debut novel, *Blood Innocents* to 1996's Edgar-winner, *The Chatham School Affair* to 2002's *The Interrogation*. Cook's latest offering, PERIL (Bantam, $23.95), won't disappoint his avid fans.

A woman's desire to leave her husband and her fear of the repercussions if she does set in motion a chain of events that will bring "peril" to a slew of characters. Cook pulls off the difficult feat of switching point of view among no fewer than eight characters as the simple story enfolds and engulfs not only Sara but even seemingly peripheral figures.

Sara Labriola's nine-year marriage to Tony hasn't been what she expected. Tony's father, Leo, is an old-school mobster, domineering and mean, and a ruthless ruler of the small pond he thinks is an ocean. Tony has never been able to measure up or to stand up to his father, and eventually Sara is driven to leave her husband, her home, her life, in a desperate attempt to escape it all.

Among those whose lives become enmeshed with Sara's are Tony, who only wants her back and safe; Leo's flunky Vinnie Caruso, who worships Leo as if he were a true mafia don; Della, Sara's neighbor, friend, and only confidante; Mortimer Dodge, a gambler living on borrowed time; Stark, a deadly, violent "finder" who is haunted by the death of a woman; Abe Morgenstern, a bar owner and a romantic; and Eddie Sullivan, Tony's pal and a friend of Caruso's.

Sara's flight from her Long Island home to nearby Manhattan is doomed to be discovered, but who will find her first and what will result remains enthrallingly uncertain. As Sara tries to establish a new life and new identity, she realizes just how unprepared she is to do anything useful. But her departure has a ripple effect setting in motion a search that will bring together and test an unlikely group. Cook deftly plucks various strands of this complex web as events spiral to a conclusion that will change the life of many and end the life of some. It is a bravura performance from a master storyteller at the top of his game.

Jonathan Kellerman has achieved best-selling successes with both his long-running Alex Delaware series (*A Cold Heart*, etc.) and also with stand-alone thrillers such as his latest, THE CONSPIRACY CLUB

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(Ballantine, $26.95), which introduces psychologist Dr. Jeremy Carrier.

While Compton's thriller focuses on a heroine dealing with a realistic police-type situation and Cook's features a concatenation of characters locked together in a fateful manner, Kellerman transports an ordinary man into an extraordinary world of conspiracy and intrigue.

The murder of Jeremy's girlfriend, Jocelyn, a murder so brutal he never learned the details of it, shattered the life he had known as a psychologist at City Central Hospital. Her life cut short, his tarnished by suspicion and the knowledge that a killer is still at large.

Skillfully, Kellerman sets the stage as Carrier tries to muddle through life despite the subtle attentions of a beautiful resident, Dr. Angela Rios, the badgering of persistent detective Bob Doresh, and the surprising blandishments provided by Dr. Arthur Chess, a renowned pathologist.

Romance heating up with Angela, police attention intensifying as additional murders occur, and an invitation from Dr. Chess to meet a small group of rich and powerful men and women who share a common aim prod Carrier into motion. Then a series of eliptical messages begin arriving and Carrier is put on the trail of something or someone unbelievably evil and dangerous.

Kellerman is expert at ratcheting up the suspense while developing secondary plots and characters that make it easy to keep turning the pages as he leads reader and hero alike on a twisting, harrowing journey that probes not just the psychology but the very nature of evil.

Jake Lamar is a former *Time* magazine writer who went to Paris intending to stay for a year and ended up staying for a decade and counting. Now he has fashioned a thriller that draws on his own knowledge of the city and one that is steeped in the history of African-American expatriates who found a home, recognition, and fame in Paris that was denied them in America.

Ricky Jenks, the hero of RENDEZVOUS EIGHTEENTH (St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95), doesn't have the star quality that brought fame to many of those who preceded him like jazz great Sidney Bechet, writers like James Baldwin and Chester Himes, or entertainers like Josephine Baker. Jenks has modest talent as a pianist and an ambition suited to his talent. He's content eking out a living in Montmartre safely distanced from the American family whose accomplishments and ambitions dwarfed his.

It is a shock, then, when Jenks's cousin Cash, rich, good-looking, and immoral, shows up in Paris in pursuit of his runaway wife and seeks his help.

Jenks's quiet life, so far disturbed only by his uncertain relationship

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with his Muslim lover Fatima, quickly becomes chaotic. A murdered transvestite prostitute is found in his apartment building, and with police interest focusing on him and his relationship with Fatima reaching a critical point, Jenks is drawn deeply into the world of African-Americans in Paris and into a bizarre and dangerous world of confused identities and violent passions.

Lamar's debut in this genre is memorable both as an artfully constructed thriller and as a fascinating look at the fascination Paris held, and holds still, for American blacks.

Luiz Alfredo Garcia-Roza is a Brazilian academic and the author of three books featuring Rio de Janeiro detective Inspector Espinosa. In the most recent installment, SOUTHWESTERLY WIND (Henry Holt, $22), translated by Benjamin Moser, Espinosa is approached by Gabriel, a visibly agitated young man, and asked to investigate a murder that hasn't happened yet. Nearly a year ago at his birthday party, Gabriel was told by a psychic that he would kill someone by his next birthday. Espinosa's curiosity is piqued, and he begins to look into Gabriel's story, if only to make sure the shaken and quickly unraveling young man doesn't lose his composure completely and fulfill the prophecy. Soon, however, an attractive young woman close to Gabriel is killed on the subway tracks under suspicious circumstances and the charlatan who had made the prediction is murdered. It seems that Gabriel's paranoia has driven him to kill, but the truth is never quite that simple. Espinosa is stationed in the upscale Copacabana district of Rio, where his job is to "keep the Third World from invading the First." This essential duality of Brazil, the impoverished living alongside the casually rich, is hinted at by Garcia-Roza, if not fully explored. For American readers, the world inhabited by Gabriel and Espinosa is much like their own. The Brazilian stereotypes American audiences are familiar with, the slums, the rhythms of Carnaval, the racial melting pot that rivals our own, are not in evidence. The strength of the book is the mystery itself, the reader's experience of the tortured Gabriel, and the bittersweet ambiguity of the conclusion. Garcia-Roza's no-frills writing style allows his story to cross cultures, losing little in the translation, and bringing none of the exoticism that can turn a piece of foreign literature into a curiosity.

—Jonas Eno-Van Fleet

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Dog on Fire

GREGORY S. FALLIS

"So I threw up. So what? It's not like I set the dog on fire."

Sometimes a weird trick of acoustics will send a snippet of a conversation arcing across a room like some cognitive Scud missile. And it'll lodge in your brain and explode, destroying every rational thought you had rattling around in there.

It was a woman's voice. There was something about the way she said it that made it clear it wasn't the first time she'd thrown up. Or the first time somebody had commented on it.

I started to turn my head and take a surreptitious glance at her.

"Joop?" Sweeney gave me a look.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I'm listening."

We were meeting new clients in a small, determinedly hip coffee bar in Boston called Donny Can Dance. One of those artsy places with severe black-and-white photographs on the wall. Each photo had a little sticker attached to it, the price written in a cool and precise hand.

It might just be the social circles I run in, but I don't know anybody who ever bought a work of art in a coffee bar.

Four of us were sitting around a 1950's-looking linoleum-topped table. Our clients fit in perfectly at Donny Can Dance. Both were dressed entirely in shades of black and gray. Kari Voicik's outfit was precisely casual. She had a pair of sunglasses with iridescent green frames on her head, holding her spiky blonde hair back like a barrette. I had the feeling the sunglasses were meant to be a statement, but I wasn't sure what the statement was. Marissa Moffet, on the other hand, wore something a businesswoman would wear. If she were a Klingon. Kari and Marissa owned the Morgen Tot Art Gallery, just around the corner from Donny Can Dance.

I might could have passed for a Donny Can Dance regular, but Kevin Sweeney, my partner in G&H Investigations, looked

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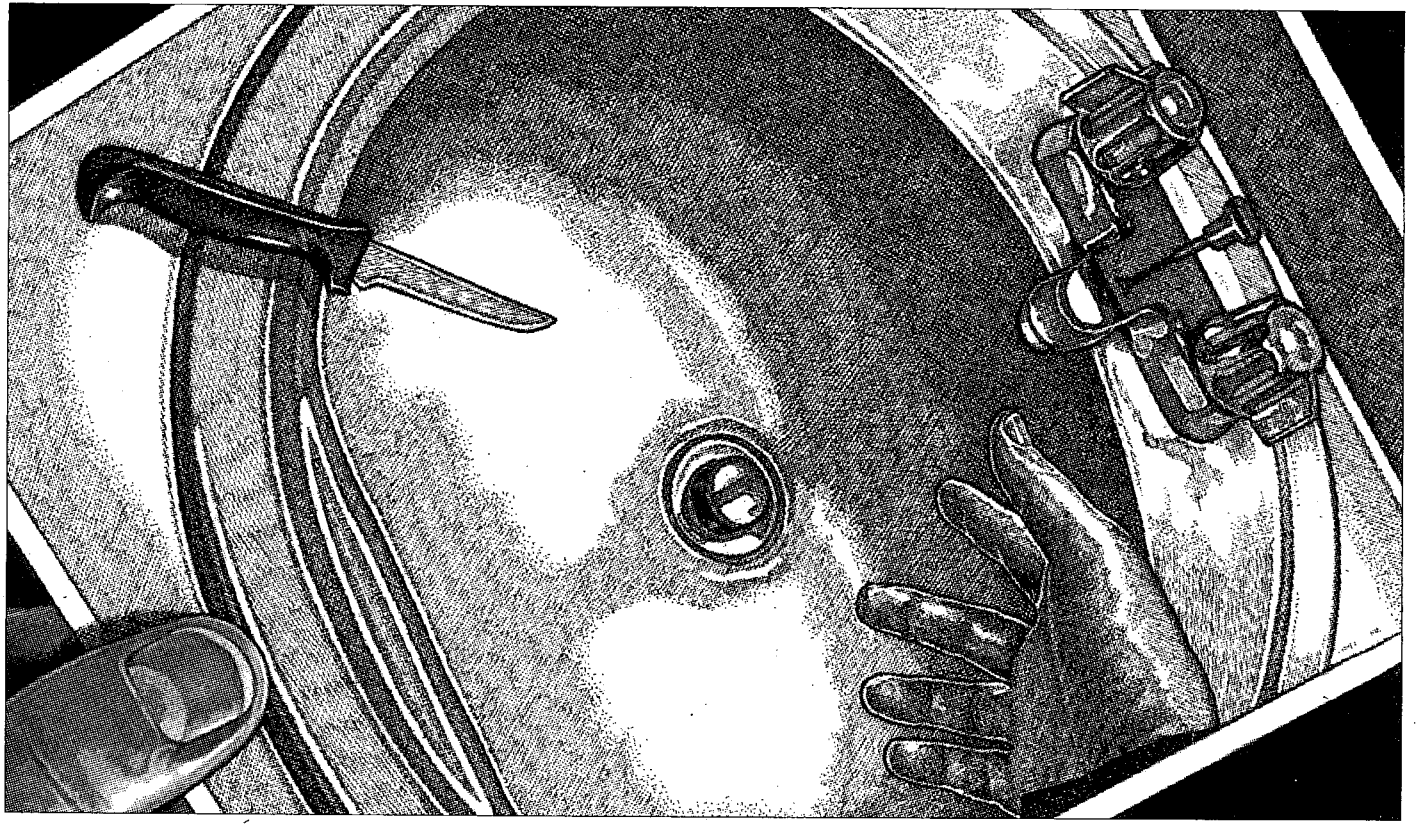
Ron Chironna



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hopelessly out of place. He looked like a cop. Which made sense, on account of he used to be a cop before he took up the private investigation gig.

"Let me make sure I understand this correctly," Sweeney said. "Every month for the last couple of years—"

"Twenty months," Marissa said.

"—for the last twenty months this woman, Dora Peabody, brought a painting to your gallery. She told you the paintings were done by her sister, Costanza."

"Right," Marissa said. "But we never actually met Costanza. Dora was acting as her agent. At least that's what she said."

Sweeney nodded. "She brought you the paintings. You sold them and gave the money to Dora."

"Minus our commission," Marissa said.

"And now two months have gone by and Dora Peabody hasn't shown up with a new painting," Sweeney continued. "And you'd like us to try to find her. Is that correct?"

"Ve are vorryink," Kari Voicik said. She had a throaty Eastern European accent. There was something round and liquid in the way she pronounced her Rs, like she had a soft-boiled quail egg in her mouth. "Somethink may happened."

"Something may have happened," Marissa corrected.

Kari shrugged. "May have happened. Some very bad think, to her, to Dora."

"Why do you think that?" Sweeney asked.

"You have to understand the nature of Costanza's art," Marissa said. "Her work is . . . well, it's disturbing. It has a quality unlike . . ."

"Show them," Kari said. "The photographs, show them. To this one." She nodded at me.

Marissa reached down beside her chair and pulled up an 11-by-14-inch portfolio. It was a high tech–looking unit, a glossy, reflective black surface clasped shut by shiny black string loosely wound around a shockingly red button. The portfolio was prettier than most of the art on the wall. She handed it to me.

Inside were twenty 8-by-10 photographs of the paintings. Each had a sequential number in one corner—the order in which they'd been brought in, according to Marissa. I studied each photo, passing them to Sweeney as I finished. The paintings depicted interior home scenes, and after seeing the first half dozen it was pretty obvious they were all set in the same house. There were people in each painting, but they were never clearly rendered. Just a menacing shape barely visible in a darkened

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doorway at the end of a hall. The trailing of a leg as somebody passed through an open door. Part of a face, distorted in the reflection of a window pane. An open refrigerator door concealing a person bent over and peering inside, the pale refrigerator light illuminating just the legs and butt.

The first several paintings had an anxious, ominous quality to them. As if something ugly was just about to happen. That tension increased in each successive painting. The last few suggested some sort of ongoing torment. A hand closing what appeared to be a bedroom door had a smear of blood across the knuckles. A black-handled paring knife looking terribly out of place on the white porcelain of a bathroom sink. In the background of the painting of the person peering into the refrigerator was a red-stained towel or dishrag wadded up on the kitchen counter and a roll of duct tape.

"So," Kari said, looking at me over her sharp Slavic cheekbones, "you are seeink. Now you know vhy ve are vorryink."

I nodded. "I understand. But just because the paintings are spooky, it doesn't mean something bad has happened. To the painter or her sister. That's what you're thinking, right?"

"Your accent," Kari said. "You are from the southern United States, yes?"

"Yes'm," I said, "I surely am." It always amazes me that foreign folks can be so familiar with American accents. Probably had something to do with the movie industry. I couldn't even tell what country Kari was from, let alone what region of that country.

"Are these paintings valuable?" Sweeney asked.

Marissa gave him a knowing, business smile. "The first few sold for just a couple hundred dollars," she said. "Now those paintings would cost you fifteen to twenty thousand, if you were lucky enough to find somebody who'd sell you one. And they're only going to increase in value. We'll probably be able to sell the next one for thirty-five thousand. Or more. If there is a next one."

Sweeney looked at the photographs again. He was a hard man to shock. But I could see he was staggered by the idea of somebody paying thirty thousand dollars for a painting of a slightly torn sweater carelessly tossed on the back of a wingback chair in somebody's sun room.

"These are not beink ordinary paintinks," Kari said, nodding toward the photographs. "They are capturink somethink deep, somethink dark in human psyche. On Internet, is whole forum discussink Costanza's work. Here, I give you Web address." She scribbled a line on a napkin and slid it over to me.

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"How is it you don't have her telephone number?" Sweeney asked. "Or an address?"

Marissa looked embarrassed. "Dora wouldn't give us an address or phone number," she said. "I figured it was a privacy thing. You know, artists. You expect them to be a bit peculiar. She didn't like questions, so I didn't ask many. She came to the gallery, she brought the paintings, we sold them and we gave her the checks. Once a month. That was it."

"Until two months ago," I said.

Kari put her hand on Marissa's arm. "Ees not your fault. You vere makink calls to be lookink for her."

Marissa looked at us and nodded. "Dora mentioned once in passing that she lived in Hobsbawm. So when we started to worry I called every Peabody listed in the Hobsbawm telephone directory. There weren't very many, but none of them knew Dora or Costanza."

"You're sure Costanza's last name is Peabody?" I asked. "The paintings are just signed Costanza."

"Dora said Costanza was her sister," Marissa said. "I just assumed . . . I suppose Peabody could be Dora's married name. Or Costanza could be married and have a different name. I suppose they could even be sisters by marriage. I don't know."

Sweeney said, "The checks were made out to . . . ?"

"Dora Peabody."

"Do you have the canceled checks with you?"

Marissa shook her head.

"Find them when you go back to the gallery," Sweeney said. "If we know which bank handled the deposit, that'll give us something to go on."

"Not much," I said. "But something. What about the police?"

"I called the police," Marissa said. "But . . ." She shrugged.

"But they told you there's nothing they can do," Sweeney finished for her. "There's no real evidence of a crime. No evidence, for that matter, that a person has gone missing. They told you that it's not against the law for a person to stop bringing paintings to your gallery. There's nothing for them to investigate."

"That's basically what they said." Marissa reached out a well-manicured hand and turned one of the photographs to face her. "I tried to show them these, but . . ." She shrugged again.

"So ve are vantink for you to be findink her," Kari said. "To be findink them both, Dora and Costanza. You vill do this, yes, for us?"

I looked at Sweeney. He shrugged, then nodded.

"We will do this, yes, for you," I said. "At least we'll try."

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Sweeney and I spent another hour at Donny Can Dance, drinking four-dollar cups of thick, sweet Turkish coffee and learning what we could about Dora Peabody. We also learned why the owners of a successful, exclusive art gallery in Boston would hire a two-person investigative agency in Hobsbawm instead of a large Boston agency. It wasn't because of our reputation as investigators. It wasn't even because of our lower hourly rates. It was because they wanted somebody familiar with the town of Hobsbawm.

A lot of artists and writers moved up the Massachusetts coast from the Boston area to Hobsbawm back in the late eighties and early nineties. Artists always go where there's cheap space, and Hobsbawm had cheap space in abundance. It had been a mill and fishing town for most of its history. But the fisheries shut down because they'd overfished the waters, and the mills shut down when the companies found it cheaper to manufacture goods in Asia and South America. With the mills closed and the fish scarce, a lot of the working people moved away. Without the working people, the small businesses died. The mill buildings sat empty and neglected for years. Then the artists discovered them. Commerce always trails along after art, and it wasn't long before developers bought up the old mills and the tenements, converting them into apartments and loft spaces and trendy shops and restaurants. And suddenly old town Hobsbawm had a thriving arts community.

After we left Donny Can Dance we drove back up the coastal highway. The tide was out and the Atlantic was pretending to be peaceful and quiet. It was that strange 'tween-season period; summer was over, but autumn hadn't quite arrived. The tourists were gone, but it was still too early for the leaf-peepers.

As we neared Hobsbawm's incorporated limits I said, "So I threw up. So what? It's not like I set the dog on fire."

Sweeney actually slowed the car down and turned to look at me. "What the hell are you talking about?"

So I told him about the snippet of conversation I overheard at Donny Can Dance. "I'm wondering why she threw up. Bad food? Hangover?"

Sweeney sighed patiently. He does that a lot. "Maybe we should talk about the case. Divvy up the chores."

I patted the glossy black portfolio Marissa had given to me at Kari's insistence. "Why don't I study the paintings and check out the Web site. You can start the tedious grunt work of looking for Dora."

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He drove quietly for a moment, and I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking, Why should I do the tedious grunt work while he studies the paintings? Sweeney's a great investigator. He's thorough and clever and reliable and he's absolutely unrelenting. But he's not what you'd call sensitive to art. He's a madman when it comes to Irish poetry, which he picked up from his momma. But he wouldn't know a Pissarro from a Pollock. And he's honest enough with himself to admit it. After a moment he sighed and said, "Right, you study the paintings. I'll start the tedious grunt work."

I nodded.

"I hate you sometimes," Sweeney said.

Which made me grin. "Hey, it's not like I set the dog on fire."

Sweeney set to the tedious grunt work as soon as we got back to the office. He decided to focus on Dora since we knew she actually existed.

I grabbed a beer to take the edge off all that Turkish coffee, then cranked up the aging office computer, logged on to the Internet, and found the Web site Kari had mentioned. The one devoted to Costanza's paintings.

I don't know what I was expecting. Gushing fan mail, maybe. Or something educational. Or even commercial. I wasn't expecting to find a profoundly serious discussion by profoundly serious people about the nature and meaning of Costanza's work. And it wasn't just local New England folks. The discussion was joined by people from all over the world. Tokyo, São Paulo, Amsterdam, Nantes, Stockholm.

They used words like "semiotics" and "hermaneutics" and "gestalt." They talked about preconscious flow and cultural memes and the ambient psychosexual subtext. They argued passionately about the most obscure details in the paintings. Whether or not the clock radio in the background of painting #5 was tuned to a public radio station. The manufacturer of a floor lamp in #16. The name of the pattern of the quilt clumped untidily on the sofa in #10, and whether that name had any symbolic meaning. Whether the torn sweater on the wingback chair was a man's or a woman's sweater . . . and whether that mattered.

Almost everybody agreed the paintings formed a narrative structure—that they told a story. But they disagreed about the sequential order in which they should be viewed. The majority assumed the paintings were created in the same order in which they were delivered to the Morgen Tot gallery, and they believed they were

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meant to be viewed in that order. Others argued for a different sequencing. A vocal minority claimed the sequence didn't matter very much, that the paintings all portrayed events that took place during a single day—possibly during a single hour.

They argued about the people in the paintings. They couldn't even agree on how many different people were depicted. Estimates ranged from three to seven, with one person from Vancouver insisting all the people in the paintings were nothing more than different aspects of the painter herself, and he wasn't completely convinced the painter was a woman. Long, acrimonious debates raged about the relationships of the people in the paintings. The majority of the people in the forum belonged to the Dysfunctional Family school, but there was also a sizable faction who claimed the people were inhabitants of some sort of managed group home—a drug treatment center or a halfway house for psychiatric patients. There was a small Incestuous Lovers contingent and a few iconoclasts and dissidents who suggested the people in the paintings were a sort of modern Manson family, a loose association of alienated drifters, lost souls, and criminals. Those opinions, though, were roundly dismissed by others as "pedestrian" and as "appealing to the sub-Oprah, Jerry Springer wing of popular culture."

But three questions haunted the forum. All the other threads of discussion eventually lead back to those same three questions. Who is the painter? What exactly is going on in the paintings? And are the events hinted at in the paintings real?

Over the last couple of weeks a fourth question had come to dominate the forum. Why wasn't there a new painting? A few people posited that Costanza had finished the series, that she'd said all she had to say with those twenty paintings and would now either disappear or, more likely, begin a new series. A number of participants, though, had reached the same conclusion as Kari and Marissa. The horrible thing the paintings had been hinting at had come to pass. And it had happened to Costanza.

I read the various threads of argument and discussion for over three hours. My beer got warm. I fetched another cold one, and it also went warm. I was still at it when Sweeney joined me.

"Bulimia," Sweeney said.

"What?" I looked up from the computer screen, feeling bleary-eyed and swimmy-headed. "What?"

"Why she threw up," Sweeney said. "The woman in the coffee bar."

"Donny Can Dance," I said. "You think she was throwing up on purpose?"

Sweeney shrugged. "It seemed like the sort of place where

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women with eating disorders would hang out. Assuming women with eating disorders would hang out in a coffee bar in the first place. So I'm thinking bulimia."

"Maybe so."

"Right. Solved that one," Sweeney said. He sat down and put his feet up. "Now, the tedious grunt work. This is what I learned about Dora Peabody. You ready?"

I told him I was.

He learned she wasn't listed in the Hobsbawm phone book or with directory assistance. Marissa had told us that, but you always have to check; it's amazing how often clients provide you with facts that are wildly inaccurate. Nor did Dora have an account with the local utilities company or the cable television provider. She wasn't registered as a voter and she wasn't listed in the local tax rolls as owning any real property. She hadn't been either married or divorced in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. There was no record of her having died, or having been born, for that matter. At least not in Massachusetts. The clerk of civil courts didn't have her recorded as a participant in any lawsuits.

Dora Peabody did, however, have an arrest record. A very short record. One arrest. Disturbing the peace, about three years earlier. Dora had pled guilty and paid a two hundred and fifty dollar fine. Unfortunately, arrest records don't indicate the actual nature of the incident or where it took place. And it didn't list an address. All that information would be available in the police reports, but those weren't public information.

Sweeney, though, was an ex-cop. Sometimes he could call in a favor.

"Think you'll be able to get the police reports?"

Sweeney shrugged. "Three-year-old reports? Might not be easy to get somebody to dig up three-year-old reports."

"So we're hosed?"

"Totally," Sweeney said. Then he grinned. "Except for the fact that Dora Peabody has a current Massachusetts driver's license."

"You jerk," I said. The grunt work might be tedious, but there's a reason somebody does it. It pays off. "You've got an address."

"I have an address. It's your turn to drive. Let's go."

"It sounds like an obsession," Sweeney said. He sat in the passenger seat and shuffled through the photos of the paintings while I filled him in on the Web site. He held up the jarring image that included the paring knife on the bathroom sink. "What the hell is this? That's just wrong."

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"There's another painting, I think it's number five," I said. Sweeney riffled through the photographs to find it. "Some folks on the Costanza Web site think that small dark thing on the dresser by the clock radio is the handle of the same knife."

He peered at the painting. "I can't tell if that's a knife handle or something else. Or just a shadow. You know, it's like Kennedy. Those conspiracy theory people, the ones who know the names of all the witnesses in Dallas and every brick in every window of the Texas School Book Depository. The more you look at this stuff, the more you feel like there's something there to see. Might just be our imagination."

"Might be."

"But it's not, is it."

"I don't think so," I said.

The address on Dora Peabody's driver's license turned out to be one of those astonishingly ugly apartment complexes built on the outskirts of town back in the early 1970s, the beginning of the tech boom in New England. Six two-story buildings separated by a big parking lot. The complex hadn't fared well. Nor had its tenants, judging by the cars in the lot. Most of them were five to ten years old, and half of them hadn't been washed or waxed in recent history.

Dora's driver's license said she was in apartment C17. Third building, second floor. But the name on the mailbox for C17 was C. R. Sluman.

C. R. turned out to be Carl Roger Sluman. A burly guy with dark, coarse hair growing over almost every inch of his body. He answered the door looking squinty and frowzled, like we'd woken him up from a nap. Which would explain why he answered our questions so grumpily. He'd lived in that apartment for almost a year, he told us. He'd never heard of Dora Peabody, he'd never heard of Costanza, he hoped he'd never hear about either of them again, he only wanted to go back to his nap.

So we tracked down the apartment manager. An old, three-fingered black guy named Henry Goodall. He answered the door and looked suspiciously at Sweeney. Like he recognized a cop when he saw one, and he'd seen a few over the years. But his face lit up when I introduced myself.

"Where you from?" he asked.

"Georgetown, South Carolina," I said.

He held out his hand and grinned. "Be damned," he said. "I used to work a shrimper out of McClellanville. You come on in."

Sweeney waited patiently while Henry fetched us some iced

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tea, and he and I swapped life stories. He'd come up North to stay with his kids in August of 1989, after losing two fingers on his right hand in an accident on a shrimp boat.

"Good timing," I said. McClellanville had pretty much been destroyed by Hurricane Hugo the following month. We talked about the hurricane for a bit, until Sweeney started to twitch. Yankees are always in such a hurry.

Henry had only been managing the apartment complex for a couple years. Like Carl Sluman, he'd never heard of Dora Peabody. But unlike Carl, he was willing to help and he had access to her file, with the lease application and agreement.

"Ain't supposed to show you this stuff," Henry said, tapping the file. "Not without no court order. She in trouble, this Dora?"

"Not legal trouble," I said. "It's a long story, but some folks are afraid she might be in danger. They want us to find her."

"Danger? What kinda danger?"

"Henry, I wish I could tell you," I said. "But I can't. Client confidentiality and all that. Sorry." It was a crock, of course. There wasn't any reason I couldn't tell him. But sometimes you get further in the detective gig if you let people think there's a mystery. People love mysteries.

"You'd really be helping out if you'd let us take a peek at those papers," I said. "And maybe helping out a woman who could be in serious trouble. It could be really important."

"Cain't do it," he said. "It's against policy. They fire my black ass, I show you this file. But hey, you need some more iced tea. Whyn't you come on along to the kitchen. Your friend, he can wait here." He dropped the file on his desk.

My glass wasn't but half empty. Still I followed Henry into the kitchen. It took us nearly fifteen minutes to fetch the tea, on account of we were so busy talking. Mostly complaining about what developers had done to Myrtle Beach and the sea islands.

Sweeney was glancing at his watch when we returned. "I hate to break up old home week," he said, "but we need to be leaving."

Henry nodded. We shook hands and he gave me a wink. "Sorry I couldn't help," he said. "But the Lord helps them what helps themselves."

"Amen," Sweeney said.

As we got in the car Sweeney asked, "How do you ever get anything done in the South? Does everybody there talk so much? And so slow?"

"Whereas the Irish are well known for being a quietly efficient people," I said. "What did we learn?"

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What we learned was this: Dora Peabody had, in fact, lived in apartment C17. She'd moved out almost three years earlier. She'd signed a year lease but left after only seven months. There wasn't any explanation in her file about why she'd left early. There was a forwarding address, but it was just a post office box number. The street address wasn't the main branch of the post office, which meant the P.O. box was probably in either a small branch office or one of those mailing and packaging centers.

"And her reference for her lease," Sweeney said. "Woman named Connie Hitchens."

"Connie? As in Costanza? You get the address?"

He gave me a look.

"Sorry," I said. Of course he got the address. Sweeney always got the address.

"It's on Willow Hill Road," he said.

"The MHI?" I asked. The state-run Mental Health Institute dominated the low hill that Willow Hill Road was named for.

"There are lots of nice old houses in that area too," Sweeney said. "Tucked back in behind the trees. You can't see them from the road."

Sweeney glanced at his watch. It was getting late and I knew he wanted to go home to Mary Margaret, his wife. I also knew he wouldn't say that. If I wanted to keep working the case Sweeney would stay at it too, knowing Mary Margaret would understand. And she would, on account of she's a wise woman. But I declare, life would be so much easier if Sweeney would just learn to say "I need to go home."

"Tomorrow morning, then?" I said.

He nodded. "Tomorrow morning," he said.

"Pregnant," Sweeney said the next morning. "Maybe she's pregnant."

"What?" I'm not at my best in the mornings. Sometimes I suspect Sweeney deliberately makes disjointed conversation in the mornings just to confuse me.

"The woman who didn't set the dog on fire," Sweeney said. "Yesterday at the coffee bar."

"Donny Can Dance," I said. "Maybe. Doesn't really sound like a pregnancy conversation, though, does it? 'So I threw up. So what?' Sort of aggressive for a pregnant woman."

Sweeney shrugged. "Maybe she's in denial about being pregnant."

"I like your bulimia theory better," I said.

It was Sweeney's turn to drive. If I'd been more open to the

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charms of the morning, I'd probably have enjoyed the cool air and the blue sky and the winding, wooded road. As it was, I found it a struggle to keep from spilling my orange juice in my lap.

"We're looking for number 455," Sweeney said. "Must be up near the MHI."

But he was wrong. It wasn't near the MHI. It was part of the MHI.

The Mental Health Institute looked more like an old baronial manor house than a state-operated psychiatric hospital. The grounds were lovely. Tall trees, well-tended lawns, colorful flowers in profusion. There were several smaller buildings gathered into little enclaves scattered throughout the extensive hospital grounds. Number 455 was in one of them.

Connie Hitchens turned out to be an outpatient psychiatric social worker. Sweeney and I showed her our private investigator licenses, which she studied with interest. "I've never met a private detective before," she said.

"We're almost like real people," I assured her. "Your name wouldn't be Costanza, by any chance, would it?"

She shook her head. "Just plain Connie. My parents named me for Connie Stevens. I guess they fell in love dancing to one of her songs."

"Who wouldn't?" I said, although I'm not sure I'd recognize a Connie Stevens song if I heard one.

"So, how can I help you?" she asked.

"We're trying to locate Dora Peabody," Sweeney said.

"Goodness," Connie said. "There's a name I haven't heard in a while. May I ask why you're looking for her?"

"Our clients are concerned about her," Sweeney said. "They think she might be in some sort of trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

Sweeney shrugged. "We're not entirely sure."

"It's complicated," I said. "Our clients have a business relationship with Ms. Peabody and they haven't heard from her for quite a while. They just want to make sure she's okay."

She nodded. "Dora hasn't been a patient here in years," she said. "Three or four, I'd guess. But she did well on her outpatient treatment and she's no longer part of my caseload."

"Do you know where she is?" Sweeney asked.

"Well, I know where she was when we released her from outpatient care," Connie said. "But I don't know if she's still there. In any event, that's confidential information. I can't give it to you."

"Was she released to a group home?" I asked. I remembered that was one of the theories discussed on the Internet.

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Connie shook her head. "No, she wasn't."

"What can you tell us about her stay here?" Sweeney asked. "I'm not asking for anything confidential. Just for public information."

Since the MHI was a state-operated facility, some information about the patients was available to the public. Like initial diagnosis and dates of hospitalization.

"Dora came to us suffering from clinical depression," Connie said. "I'd have to find her file and look up her admission and release dates. What exactly are you concerned about? That she might hurt herself?"

"Or that somebody else might hurt her," I said. I looked at Sweeney and tapped the portfolio with the paintings. He nodded. "Would you mind looking at some photos?" I asked.

It took a moment to explain, but when Connie Hitchens saw the photos she went pale. "Goodness," she said. "Goodness. And you say Dora sold these paintings?"

We nodded.

"That doesn't make any sense at all," Connie said. "Dora wasn't the least bit artistic. Except when it came to gardening. She cared for the flowers here. In fact, she was hired to work as a gardener when she left here."

"By whom?" Sweeney asked.

Connie shook her head, still looking at the photos. "I'll tell you what I'll do," she said. "I'll call her last known address and see if she's still there and if she's okay."

She shooed us out of her office while she made the call.

"What do you think?" Sweeney asked as we stood in the hallway.

"I'm thinking pizza," I said. "For lunch. Not much use thinking anything about the case at the moment. If our Connie tells us everything is okay, we'll still have to find Dora and check for ourselves. If she tells us everything is not okay, we're in exactly the same situation. So I'm thinking pizza."

"Pizza then," Sweeney said.

A few minutes later Connie invited us back into her office. "I've spoken to her employer," she said. "He assures me Dora is fine."

"Did you mention the paintings?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I wasn't sure how to bring them up. But he says Dora has been with him since she was released from here and she's doing just fine. So maybe the paintings are just paintings?"

"Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," I said. "The duct tape, the knife, the blood on the towel—probably doesn't mean anything at all."

She gathered up the photographs of the paintings and slid

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them back inside the portfolio. She took a deep breath and said, "I didn't show you this."

She turned a piece of scrap paper on her desk so we could read it. There was a name and a telephone number. The name was James G. Dolan.

I looked at Sweeney, then at Connie Hitchens. I raised an eyebrow.

She nodded.

"Well," I said.

I'd seen James Gilbert Dolan before. Two or three times, in fact. From a distance. At Fenway Park. He's a huge Red Sox fan. There was an interview in a magazine a couple years back in which Dolan said he learned everything he knew about horror and suspense from the Red Sox. One of the first things he bought himself after he became a multimillionaire horror writer was box seat season tickets at Fenway. Right off third base.

I'd read a couple of his novels. Everybody in the world has probably read a couple of his novels. Or seen a movie based on one of his novels. I suspect Osama bin Laden, holed up in his cave in Afghanistan, has read at least one James Gilbert Dolan novel.

Dolan wrote horror stories. Hugely successful horror stories full of vampires and ghosts and all sorts of macabre creatures who haunt our nightmares. Readers loved him and critics hated him. He was sort of the Alfred Hitchcock of the supernatural. One reviewer had referred to his writing as "Edgar Allan Poe joins WrestleMania" and claimed Dolan trivialized perversity and angst by making it popular.

Dolan just kept writing and hired people to drive truckloads of cash to the bank.

"Are we thinking the same thing?" I asked as we drove away from the MHI.

"I don't know," Sweeney said. "Are you thinking that anybody who writes like James Dolan could be into some strange and dangerous stuff? That maybe whatever horror Costanza was painting somehow involves Dolan?"

I nodded. "Well, that and about pizza for lunch."

"At least we won't have to do any tedious grunt work to find his address," Sweeney said. Dolan was a local boy who'd made good. He had a house—well, a mansion I guess you'd call it—a few miles north of the Hobsbawm incorporated limits. When he became rich and famous he didn't move to New York City or Hollywood.

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He stayed in Massachusetts and built himself a house the size of a hotel. Then he had to build himself a tall wall around it to protect himself from the gawkers and stalkers.

"So, what's the plan?" I asked.

"The plan is to go knock on his door," Sweeney said, "and ask to see Dora Peabody."

"We're going to knock on James Dolan's door," I said.

"Why not?"

Sweeney used to be a cop and he still thinks like a cop. Cops have a special kind of authority. It's based on the fact that they're basically the only people in the U.S. who are authorized to occasionally shoot their fellow citizens. They ask a question, they feel they have a right to an answer. I have to keep reminding Sweeney that he's just another civilian now. A private detective's license doesn't grant you any special power. It just gives you the right to charge a fee for asking nosy questions.

I thought about reminding him again, then decided it would be more amusing to see what happened when he knocked on James Dolan's door and demanded to see Dora Peabody. You take your fun where you can get it in this job.

"Let's go," I said.

The first barrier, literally, to the Sweeney Plan was the massive gate. It was black wrought iron and very fancy in a sort of perverse rococo style. It was decorated with fanciful gold-painted bats and spiders. There was an intercom in a small wrought-iron box designed to look like a haunted house. The red intercom button represented the door of the haunted house.

Sweeney pushed the button and when a tinny voice responded he said, "Kevin Sweeney and Joop Wheeler to see Dora Peabody."

There was a pause. Then, "Who?"

"Private investigators Kevin Sweeney and Joop Wheeler. We're here to see Dora Peabody."

"Do you have an appointment?" asked the tinny voice.

Sweeney gave me a look. Appointment? "No," he said to the intercom. "But it's important that we speak with her. Please let her know we're here."

"I'm sorry," said the voice. "Nobody is allowed to enter without an appointment."

"We need to speak with Ms. Peabody," Sweeney said calmly.

"If you don't leave, sir, we'll be forced to notify the police."

"Good," Sweeney said. "Call them. We'll wait here." He put the car in park and turned off the engine. "Maybe it'll be somebody I know," he said to me. Then he shrugged. "And if not, I'll explain

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that we have information about one of the people inside and we're concerned about her safety. They'll have to check on that."

A couple minutes passed before the voice on the intercom returned. "Please proceed in," it said. And the bat and spider gate made a loud click and slowly opened.

Sweeney started the car and turned to me with a bland, innocent expression that was clearly meant to say "See, I told you it would work, but notice how I'm deliberately not being smug even though I have plenty of reason to be?"

After I interpreted the expression I gave him a bland, innocent expression right back, one that was clearly meant to say "Bite me, you hoser."

The bat and spider architectural theme mercifully stopped as soon as we passed through the gate. The large yard had the same placid and unstudied look as the grounds of the Mental Health Institute. Tall oaks, clumps of bright flowers, manicured lawn. The house itself looked like a classic New England inn, with a wide wraparound porch. It looked very friendly and welcoming. They could have used the house for a Welcome to Massachusetts brochure.

The long driveway ended in a circle in front of the house. Casually sitting on the steps leading up to the porch was James Gilbert Dolan his ownself. He was wearing old blue jeans, a faded denim shirt, and black canvas sneakers. He stood up as we approached and stuck out his hand.

"Hi," he said and we shook hands. He didn't bother to introduce himself. He knew we recognized him. "I understand you're looking for Dora. Do you mind if I ask what this is about? She works for me."

"Actually we're looking for her sister Costanza," Sweeney said. "We're hoping Dora can tell us where she is."

"Her sister," Dolan said. He sort of cocked his head and smiled. There was a sadness to the smile. "Well, let's go inside, shall we?"

We followed him inside to a charming and congenial sunroom off the side porch. The walls were a cheery yellow that perfectly set off the blue Moorish tile floor. A pair of tall wingback chairs and a low sofa were casually arranged around an old steamer trunk that served as a coffee table. The sunlight slanted in through the large windows at just the perfect angle. A slight breeze carried the scent of the flowers through the screens. I could hear the hushed snicking of shears from outside, somebody trimming bushes in the yard.

It was a perfect room and I felt I could live there for the rest of my life.

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Dolan got us settled into the wingback chairs and set himself down on the sofa. "Well, where to start?" he said. "I've told you Dora Peabody works for me. She takes care of my gardens. I can also tell you she doesn't have a sister named Costanza."

"But the name's familiar to you," Sweeney said. "You recognized it when I said it." As he spoke, Sweeney calmly scanned the room. Police detectives—well, all cops, really—are suspicious. The operative assumption of guilt is what criminologists call it. Police work trains them to see everybody in terms of what that person might have done wrong and what danger they might represent. It trains them to look at their physical surroundings in terms of what threats it might hold. It's terribly bad manners, but it helps keep them alive on the street.

"Did I?" Dolan asked.

Sweeney nodded.

"Perhaps I did." Dolan took a deep breath and stood up. "I think I'd like some lemonade," he announced. "Can I get you some? I make it with rosewater. It's very good. Or maybe you'd prefer iced tea?"

We both asked for the lemonade. I stood up as well. "And, uh . . . a restroom?"

Dolan beckoned me into the hallway. He pointed. "Down there and to the left. Third or fourth door."

I didn't really need to use the bathroom. It was just a reason to snoop. I'm not as well versed as Sweeney in the operative assumption of guilt, but something was clearly wrong. Dolan's responses weren't normal. On the other hand, I told myself, this is a guy who makes up stories about vampires and demons. Who knows what passes for normal in his mind?

The bathroom was easily found and I was putting it to use when the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I knew this bathroom. I'd seen it before. In one of Costanza's paintings. There'd been a black-handled knife on the white porcelain sink.

I took my time returning to the sunroom. I studied every door and every room I passed, trying to see if I could recognize it from the paintings. One of the doors led to a bedroom, and through the bedroom was a half bath.

Painting #5. I recognized the clock radio on the dresser. But I didn't pay much attention to it. My attention was focused on the bathroom and the short-haired, skeletally thin woman inside who was handcuffed to a radiator.

She looked up. Saw me. Used her foot to close the bathroom door.

I got back to the sunroom just as Dolan was returning, carrying

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a cork-bottom tray with three tall glasses of lemonade. I accepted a glass and returned to the wingback chair.

"Recognize this chair?" I asked Sweeney.

He frowned and blinked a couple of times, then looked more closely at the chair. I saw the realization cross his face. It was the chair that held the torn sweater in one of the paintings.

Dolan handed Sweeney a glass of lemonade; he set the tray on a side table, then eased himself onto the sofa.

"Let me know what you think of the lemonade," he said. "Then tell me how you found out. I was beginning to think I'd actually get away with it."

I sipped the lemonade. The rosewater really made a difference. Cut the tartness without making it too sweet.

"It's very good," I said. "How much rosewater do you use?"

"Get away with what, Mr. Dolan?" Sweeney asked.

Dolan stared at Sweeney for a long moment. Then he smiled. "Oh, I have gotten away with it, haven't I? Or at least I had until I opened my mouth. I thought you'd figured it out. But you haven't, have you?"

"Why don't you explain it to us," Sweeney said.

Dolan grinned and shook his head. "Oh no, that would never do."

"Why are you playing at riddles?" Sweeney asked.

Dolan made a gesture like the answer ought to be obvious. "Because riddles amuse me. Why do you try to solve riddles?"

"Because I get paid to," Sweeney said. "And I'm being paid to find and talk to Costanza. Do you know where she is?"

Dolan grinned and nodded.

"Where?" Sweeney asked.

"In her bedroom," he said. "You'd like to talk to her, I suppose."

Sweeney nodded.

Dolan turned his head and called out, "Costanza! Could you come here please?" To us he said, "It may take her a moment. She's sort of tied up."

"Handcuffed would be more accurate, wouldn't it?" I said. "To a radiator?"

"A radiator?" Dolan said with a laugh. "Really?"

Sweeney sat forward in his chair, frowning. That man has a frown that would scare livestock.

At that moment the skinny young woman walked into the sunroom, wiping her hands on a towel. She raised her eyebrows in question. "What's up?" she asked.

"These gentlemen are looking for you," Dolan said.

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She eyed us cautiously. "For me? Why?"

"Kari Voicik and Marissa Moffet are worried about you," Sweeney said.

"Who?"

"The women who run the Morgen Tot gallery."

Costanza shrugged and shook her head. "No idea what you're talking about."

"Are you Dora Peabody's sister?" Sweeney asked.

"Her sister? No. We're friends, but we're not related. What's this about?"

"Why were you handcuffed in the toilet?" I asked.

She rubbed her bony wrists. "Research," she said. "I'm working on a novel. I wanted to see how difficult it really is to pick a handcuff lock." She looked at Dolan. "What's going on?"

"The paintings," Dolan said. His grin was huge.

Costanza looked at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, then her face brightened and she nodded. "Oh, the paintings."

"Maybe we should talk to Dora," Sweeney said.

"She's outside trimming hedges," Costanza said. "Want me to get her?"

"I don't think we need to," I said.

Dolan sat forward and put his lemonade on the table. "Why not?" he asked.

"You did the paintings," I said. "You used Costanza's name for the signature and you had Dora sell them."

Dolan leaped up, grabbed me by the face, and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

He had no other way to do it.

"I'm too famous," Dolan said. "I've tried to find different venues to express myself. I've done a couple of journalism pieces. I've shot photographs of old blues singers. I wrote a play. And I sold them all. Easily. But I was never sure if people were buying my work because it was good work or because I'm James Gilbert Dolan."

"Sure," I said. "Makes sense."

"I know I have no reason to complain," he said. "I've gotten rich by writing horror and supernatural stuff. But it's so limited. I have all these other ideas. Some small thing happens—the sort of thing most people would instantly forget—and it sparks a bunch of ideas and they bang round in my brain for days. Weeks, sometimes. Then, if I'm lucky, all those ideas will sort of coalesce into one and

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I'll have a project to work on. It's like when you go swimming and then a few hours later you lay down and a bit of warm water drips out of your ear. That's what it's like."

"Like warm water out of your ear?" Sweeney said.

Dolan didn't even hear him. "I had this idea for a series of linked paintings that almost tell a story. Not quite, but almost. Just enough of a story to make it obvious there was a story, but vague enough that people could put their own meaning in it. I knew I could do the paintings and I knew I could sell them. But would anybody take them seriously?"

"So you used another name," Sweeney said.

"So I used another name," Dolan agreed.

He'd hired both Dora Peabody and Costanza Malin years earlier through a program to support recently released psychiatric patients. Dora helped maintain his grounds and gardens; the work was therapy to help her combat depression. Costanza, who'd been hospitalized several times for anorexia, did light housework and wanted to write spy novels. Both of them had happily agreed with Dolan's plan for the paintings. And they'd done well by it. He didn't need the money, so he'd let them split the profits from the sale of the paintings.

Dolan had been absolutely delighted by the serious response to his paintings. He avidly followed the discussions on the Internet. It was all much more than he'd expected. It was the first time, he said, he'd ever been taken seriously as an artist.

"But it never occurred to me that the people at Morgen Tot would hire detectives to track down Costanza," he said. "Now what happens?"

"Now we tell our clients that we've found Costanza and that she's okay," Sweeney said. "They'll want to know if there will be more paintings."

Dolan shook his head. "No, no, that's finished. I did what I wanted to do with it. No point in doing it again. Will you tell them about me?"

"We have to," I said. "If we don't, they'll probably want to talk to Costanza and encourage her to paint more. They're making money off this."

Dolan nodded. "Yeah, that's what I thought. They'll make a lot more money, probably, once the world finds out I painted them. The paintings will sell for more, but they'll lose all their critical value. And I'll take a lot of crap from the media."

"I'm sorry," Sweeney said. "But we have an obligation to our clients. I know it's not fair to you."

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"It's not like you set the dog on fire," I added.

Dolan looked at me. "What?"

So I told him about the conversation I'd overheard at Donny Can Dance.

"Chemotherapy," he said when I finished. "She was probably sick because of the chemo. Or radiation treatments."

He got a distant look on his face. I figured he was doing something creative.

Sweeney finished his lemonade and stood up. It was time to go. No point in waiting for the warm water to drip out of Dolan's ear.

Marissa Moffet was horrified. "What if our clients found out?" she asked. "They'll think we were in on it. They'll think we conned them."

Kari Voicik was wryly amused. "Vell, a lesson ve haf learned. Who vould believe paintinks like that could beink done by a man?"

Both decided to keep Dolan's name a secret for fear they'd lose their reputation as a serious art gallery. Kari made an announcement on the Costanza Web site that the artist had said all there was to say with that series of paintings and was now working on another project.

Four months later, a FedEx messenger brought us a large envelope from James Gilbert Dolan. Inside was a check for $935.72 and a magazine with a short story written by Dolan. It was about two detectives who overheard a snippet of a conversation in a determinedly hip Boston coffee house and found themselves caught up in a nightmarish adventure involving demons feeding on cancer patients. The story was titled "Dog on Fire."

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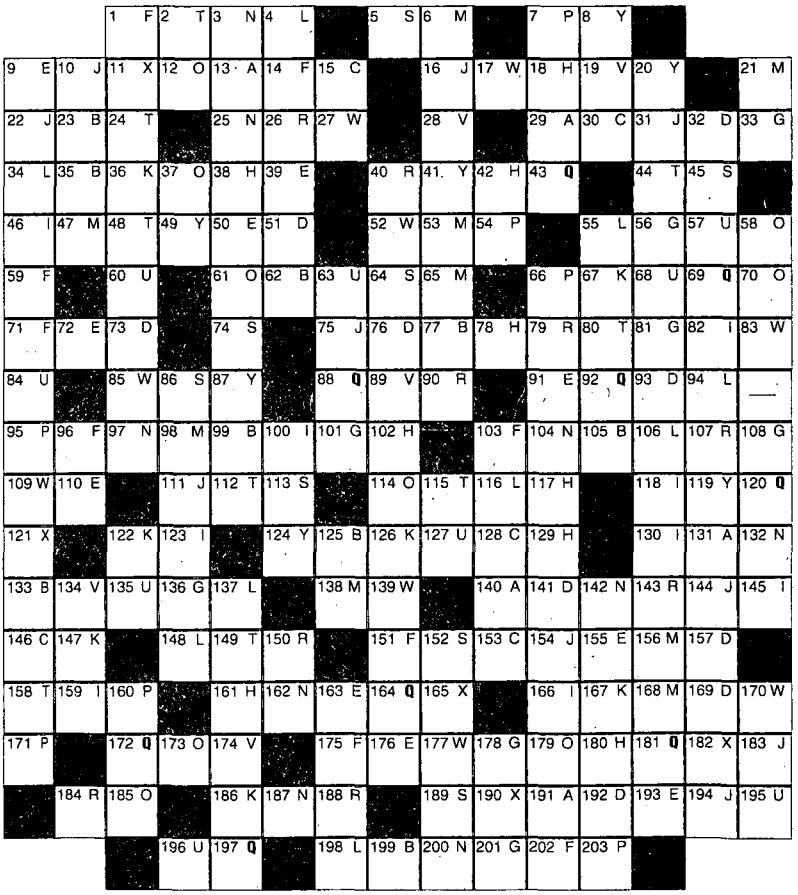
DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY JACQUELINE E. MATHEWS

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken. The solution will appear in the June issue. The solution to last month's logic puzzle is on page 123.



DEFINITIONS **WORDS**

A. Team's reserve strength ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

140 13 29 191 131

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B. Brown's group: 2 wds.

133 105 62 23 35 99 125 199 77

C. Promising prospective mate

146 30 15 153 128

D. Long hose: hyph. wd.

169 51 32 93 76 141 73 192 157

E. Carpenter's work, perhaps

110 91 176 50 163 9 39 155 193 72

F. Employment hurdle

175 14 59 96 103 151 71 202 1

G. Small African parrot

101 81 108 178 56 136 33 201

H. Southern Connecticut town: 2 wds.

102 18 78 180 38 129 42 117 161

I. Key group: 2 wds.

123 82 46 159 145 130 166 118 100

J. Hoofer's forte: 2 wds.

154 111 31 194 144 183 75 22 10 16

K. Zoo creation

147 126 122 36 67 167 186

L. An oligochaete

137 55 116 4 148 34 106 94 198

M. Bustle

168 47 21 156 53 138 98 6 65

N. Run-through

200 104 187 162 3 132 142 25 97

O. In the dark

58 179 70 61 173 114 12 185 37

P. Below-waist undergarment

171 203 7 54 160 95 66

Q. Far from futile

164 172 197 43 69 88 181 92 120

R. Fill again

150 90 143 107 188 26 184 79 40

S. It's played with a plectrum

189 74 86 5 64 113 152 45

T. Touch up

149 48 80 115 24 112 44 158 2

U. A basidiomycete

135 68 60 84 195 127 57 196 63

V. Split —

89 28 19 174 134

W. Learned surreptitiously

139 177 170 17 52 109 85 83 27

X. It gives ambience

121 190 11 182 165

Y. Child's nighttime visitor

119 124 8 87 49 41 20

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SOFT AND APPROACHABLE

GARY ALEXANDER

"Okay, boys and girls, a stale lawyer joke. Hey, quit moaning. If a lawyer and an IRS agent were both drowning, and you could save only one, would you—go to lunch or read the paper?"

Buster Hightower won smiles and light applause. He scanned the crowd of fifteen or twenty for Carla Chance, his very significant other. She always attended when he aired out a new set, but she'd said she might be late. She'd been acting mysterious the past week. Some sales contest some insurance company her agency sold policies for, or something.

"I love football," Buster said, flapping his Seattle Seahawks sweatshirt. "How 'bout them 'Hawks?"

He drew a smattering of Bronx cheers from the Westside Lanes and Casino lounge audience. Tall and chunky and fifty, Buster was a career comic who played at the fringes of his profession, whistle-stopping to saloons and dinner parties and second tier comedy clubs. He took his gigs where he found them.

Buster Hightower's signature was his ranting and raving, a maniacal outrage over politics and other trivia. His material contained neither obscenity nor cruelty. No misogyny, no racism, no bathroom humor. Never had, never would. Consequently, his appeal was seriously curtailed.

Still no Carla. On the plus side, he could shift into his next bit without risking death or dismemberment.

"My girlfriend told me that I love football more than I love her. Before I could lie and say I don't, she says, 'Before you lie to me and you say you don't, I've heard that old joke, *But I love you more than basketball.* I've heard it a million times and if I hear it again, I'm gonna go ballistic!'

"She must be, whadayacallit, telepathological. I'm between a rock and a hard place. I do what any normal male with an ounce of sur-

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vival instincts would do. To throw her off balance, I sorta change the subject. It's either that or run for the door. I ask her what I'm asking you. Which is, How come they call football *football?"*

Buster bellowed out the last sentence while glancing at the exits.

He was getting a headache from clattering bowling pins and a dense cloud of smoke. The women were sitting up straighter, though, smirking, responding.

"Think about it. How often does a football player put his foot to the ball? Mostly they're running and passing and renegotiating their contracts and blocking and tackling and arguing with the zebras, right? And you know what? The only time they actually kick, when they send in some midget named Laszlo, is if somebody screwed up.

Buster was a career comic at the fringes of his profession, whistle-stopping to saloons and second tier comedy clubs.

"You kick off cuz you lost the coin toss and the other team wants the ball. Or they kick off to you on account of you let them score. You punt the ball cuz you can't move it. You kick a field goal cuz you can't score a touchdown. You kick an extra point cuz you don't have the guts to run or pass for two points.

"When you kick the ball, it's a disaster that's been or a disaster waiting to happen. You miss the field goal or extra point, that's a goose egg on the scoreboard. They block the field goal and run it back for a touchdown and you're nine points worse off than before. Or you kick off or punt and they run it back for six. Whoever called the game football was a sicko."

Looking out from the rickety makeshift platform that served as his stage, Buster detected wide smiles and nods. He picked up his beer from atop the cigarette machine on his left. He took a long gulp to clapping and chuckles. Also a good sign tonight—they weren't playing darts, firing them at the board three feet to his right.

Energized, his voice rose. "By the time I got done philosophicating on football, my girlfriend knew she was royally steamed about something, but couldn't remember what. We went out to dinner and we'll maybe live happily ever after.

"I go to bad restaurants to avoid wine snobs, them guys with keys hanging from their pencil necks. When they talk, all you see and hear is their nostrils. They push their Château Froufrou 1924 on you, telling you how it's brimming with fruit and is a stunning crescendo to a good steak. Brimming with fruit. That's how they

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talk, and the wine they're hustling costs as much as a decent used car. So I took her out to my favorite restaurant. They don't push wine on you at the drive-up window. Large fries, yeah. Wine, no.

"The last straw on wine was when I went into this supermarket. You know how cutesy supermarkets are getting. Delis, gourmet food aisles, and wine shelves that take up half the store. They're hiring their own wine snobs too, grocery clerks with an attitude.

"This guy who's sprinkling dust on the wine bottles asks if he can be of assistance. I say, yeah, sure, I want a jug of cheap wine. We're having friends over for dinner and whaddaya recommend? Big, *big* mistake.

"He asks red or white, sweet or dry, domestic or imported, varietal or blend. Me, I was torn between cork and screw top. My girlfriend said to pick one out with a classy label that has a date on it, so I say red and I want them grapes stomped within a fifty-mile radius of Seattle by people who wash their feet. You say France to somebody like this, God help you.

"He gives me a look like I'm stuck to the bottom of his shoe. He says he has a soft and approachable Merlot. Soft and approachable. I once dated a girl named Merla or Merle or something. When I tried to get her to be soft and approachable, she poked a thumb in my eye and walked out of the movie theater."

The guys were sitting up straighter too. Some were laughing out loud. They'd run the wine snob gauntlet. They'd gone out with Merla/Merle.

Carla?

Carla, please come home.

"Oh yeah, I says to him, how much for your soft and approachable? Twenty-four dollars. Yikes! Listen, I says, these are friends coming to dinner, not somebody who pulled me out of a burning car. Well, he says, I have an everyman's Cabernet that might suffice. Eight ninety-five. It lacks complexity and it's green and earthy. However, it does have a velvety texture, reverberating with cherry and plum, barely hinting at an undertone of tannins.

"That was it!" Buster screamed. "It wasn't worth saving fifteen bucks to be insulted. I didn't even bother to ask where the cherry and plum came from. To the best of my recollection wine is made out of grapes. I went for domestic *and* foreign. I came home with a half rack each of Budweiser and Heineken. If the dinner guests don't like it they can lump it.

"Speaking of lumps, my girlfriend says, making a fist. Whoa, I says. Beer is an endangered species. Yeah, it is. Seriously. Those scientists who're out to prove everything we like to eat and drink causes can-

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cer? They're using the same laboratory rats they used to prove artificial sweeteners give you cancer. You remember. After eight thousand cans of sugar substitute soda pop the critters sprouted tumors.

"The rats had their surgery and radiation and chemotherapy, and now the pointy heads have got them on the suds. It's taking time, what with the rats getting DUIs and being in and out of rehab and running to the bathroom every five minutes. I'm not even gonna get into what it's doing to their love life. Drink up while you can. The bad news might be in tomorrow's paper."

Buster lifted his beer bottle to the dim light and squinted through it as Carla Chance hurried in and took a seat.

"Okay, kids, my hourglass is empty. You folks deserve a break, but I gotta close with a stale lawyer joke too. Sorry. It's in my union contract. What do you toss that drowning lawyer? Wait, wait, wait. You were gonna say the IRS agent. Wrong, wrong, wrong. You toss him his partners.

"Hey, you guys, you been great. Go on out there to the alley and bowl a royal flush and to the card tables and draw a three hundred game."

Buster gingerly dismounted his stage and went to Carla. She was Rubenesque, two years older than him, and one inch shorter. She dressed in tight-fitting clothes in primary colors, tonight in red and yellow. They made a noticeable couple.

Buster had a better-never-than-late crack ready, but hesitated. Carla had gotten up, stuck the fake rose from the vase on her table between her teeth, and was doing a twirling cha-cha-cha number. Too weird. Buster decided to keep his yap shut till spoken to.

"Guess what, big boy."

"You just come from Arthur Murray with your diploma in the Mexican hat dance?"

"That was the flamenco, Mr. Uncouth. We're going to Spain!"

"I thought this company sent its sales winners to some resort near their home office," Buster said through a yawn. It was the next morning, the crack of dawn, at nine thirty. Thanks to Carla's prodding they were going from her condo they shared to the aptly tagged Last Chance Insurance Agency.

"Usually they do. To Turpentine Springs, Arkansas."

"Don't all insurance companies come out of Hartford?"

"No, but once upon a time Unity did. They moved west throughout the years, chasing low wages. There's a lake with cabins near Turpentine Springs. Fishing and swimming is good, although you have to watch out for water moccasins."

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"Sounds peachy keen. How'd the prize get flipped to Madrid?"

"I about fainted. I'm going to network today and try to find out."

Buster was driving his most prized possession, his only asset of value, a red 1959 Cadillac Eldorado convertible. The used car he had purchased decades ago was now a classic. It wasn't showroom-perfect, but it was as pristine as when he barnstormed in it to gigs in the 1970's.

"Think of the cultural enrichment. We won't be sitting around a swampy lake for a week, being eaten by bugs," Carla went on. "We'll be culturally enriching ourselves at some of Europe's greatest cathedrals and museums."

"Have it your way. At this ungodly hour, I can't carry on a debate."

Buster and Carla had met at her office. A massive assemblage of red paint and chrome had lurched to a noisy halt at her door, and in shambled a loopy-looking galoot with wild hair, seeking to buy an automobile policy. His car was a vulgar antique operated on public roads by a man with the worst driving record she had ever seen. Coverage was denied by the most marginal of the carriers she represented, but his request for a date wasn't.

A passenger in an uninsurable vehicle driven by an uninsurable driver, Carla Chance cinched her belt tighter. She had cajoled Buster into working one day a week at Last Chance Insurance Agency. He was fidgety and computerphobic, more of a nuisance than not, but it was a start. Taming the feral comic was how she saw it, a long-range project.

"Put your charm and humor to regular use," she'd say. "You could be a top seller, Buster. You'd earn a respectable living for once in your life. Do you know what the commission is on a quarter million dollar whole life policy is?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he'd reply.

Last Chance was located fifteen minutes from the condo in a suburban wasteland of strip malls, medical and dental offices, and muffler shops. The agency was between a dry cleaners and a teriyaki restaurant. Buster Hightower inhaled deeply; they were grilling meat.

Inside he said, "I forget the name of this company."

"Unity Property and Casualty Insurance Company," she said.

"The same outfit that had life insurance on Custer?"

"No. That's Little Bighorn Life and Indemnity. They wrote five members of the Seventh Cavalry, but not Custer."

"Okay. They insured the *Titanic*."

"No, Buster. That's Catastrophe Casualty. They had a small percentage of the hull coverage."

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"Lucky them," Buster said, looking at Carla's framed Yellow Pages ad on the wall behind her desk: LAST CHANCE INSURANCE AGENCY. TICKETS? DUI? ACCIDENTS? CANCELED INSURANCE? SUSPENDED LICENSE? NO PROBLEM!!!

Last Chance was a one-person office and none too roomy. Buster settled into the desk Carla had shoehorned in for him. A spider web grew on his computer monitor.

"Unity P. and C. is—how shall I put it?—a niche carrier. They write unusual business."

"When can we go to lunch?" Buster whined.

"When it's lunchtime. While I network and work on travel details, please clear messages and open the mail."

Buster muttered to himself and jabbed the blinking message button. There was a call from a guy with a sad tale about a five-car crash and a flunked Breathalyzer test. Then a gal who wanted to add a third motorcycle to her policy. Pests. Buster erased them. If it was really important, they'd call again.

He began on the mail. Letterheads included Mayhem Mutual, Angst Auto and Home, St. Carcinoma Health Plans. Jeez, the companies Carla sold for. This Unity must be a piece of work too. Carla's writing a tattoo parlor and a fireworks warehouse put her over the top in their contest. Buster dumped the mail into her in-box and killed an hour tossing paper clips into a coffee cup.

Carla finally wrapped up what she was doing and said, "The power of the Internet, Buster."

"What's that mean?"

"A couple of weeks ago when the trip was being set up, somebody at Home Office was goofing off, surfing the Net, and he came upon round-trip airfare to Madrid that was two hundred bucks cheaper than most anywhere in the States to Little Rock, and since past winners had complained of chiggers and cockroaches at the cabins . . . They're even picking up fifty percent of our hotel."

"Last of the big spenders."

"Be nice, Buster. This is an insurance company, after all. Are you going to have any trouble getting a week off at the Westside?"

"I don't think so. I talked to the manager already. He pumped a fist in the air and said, 'There is a God'."

Madrid. Buster had never experienced anything like it. He'd been around and he'd been nowhere. In his itinerant career he had crisscrossed the Midwest and West Coast, but he'd never been out of the country.

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"This entire town is a museum," he told Carla during the cab ride from the airport to their hotel.

Carla was squeezing the blood out of Buster's wrist as they slalomed through traffic. "How fast are we going?"

"I'm afraid to look at the speedometer, but I'll bet he has car insurance."

"Buster, life isn't fair. Deal with it."

Their hotel was a baroque firetrap near a train station. It had an ancient elevator that jerked and made tortured mechanical noises. Their room was a crackerbox with medieval bathroom plumbing. But Buster was too tired to care. He flopped on the bed.

"It's only noon," Carla said. "You have to stay up."

"Yeah? My aching body and head tell me it's midnight, either last night or tomorrow."

She began tickling him.

"C'mon, gimme a break. We got a week to do the museums and cathedrals. Lemme snooze a second."

Carla experimented with different tickling spots.

"Okay, okay, okay. On one condition. We go eat."

"Buster, we ate on the plane."

"That doesn't count."

They went out onto the street. What a city, Buster thought. There were statues and fountains and gingerbread buildings galore. Everybody had a cell phone pressed to an ear, and the women dressed like fashion models. Everyone smoked, and he had yet to see a vacant parking place.

"Carla, on the plane I read in your guidebook about them tapas bars they have in Spain. They serve all kinds of appetizers, tapas, which they sometimes dish up for free if you order a drink, no great hardship."

"Business before pleasure. We need to find a cybercafe so I can check my e-mail."

"What can you eat at a cybercafe?" he asked.

They found one on the next block. Rows of young people were staring at monitors. Buster said, "Euro geeks. There's gotta be fifty pounds of nose rings in this joint."

"Sit," Carla ordered.

Buster sat.

Carla logged on and after a minute said, "Uh-oh. Unity has a substantial new loss here in Madrid. They're requesting that I take the initial report and hold the policyholder's hand."

"I told you so about e-mails and computers. There ain't no free lunch. Who, what, and where?"

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"His name is Ed Digdale. For some reason, his name is familiar. He's staying at the Madrid InterPresidential."

Buster whistled. "Them InterPresidentials are ritzy. Carlin and Seinfeld, guys like them, when they're on the road, that's where they stay. What's Digdale's claim?"

"A bottle of wine was stolen from his room."

"So? Call room service and have them send up a replacement. Case closed."

"It's a little more complicated, Buster. This is a 1789 Château Larue claret. The label's initialed by a former owner, Thomas Jefferson. It's one of a kind, purchased by Digdale at an auction for three hundred twelve thousand dollars, a record price that still stands."

"Is it soft and approachable?"

Carla looked at him.

"A question comes to mind," Buster said.

"More than a few come to mine. What's yours?"

"Can we eat now?"

There was a tapas bar two doors down. They stood at the bar and plowed into saucer-sized plates of meatballs, sautéed shrimp, chorizo sausage, spicy potato chunks, and omelet slices the Spanish called *tortillas patatas.*

Buster speared a shrimp with a toothpick, held it up, and said, "Your wine situation is fishier than this."

"Explain."

"Nature abhors a coincidence. That's the only thing I learned in high school physics before I flunked out. You here, this Digdale guy here, the wine gone bye-bye."

"Unity does write bizarre risks, so I can't argue with your logic. Let's go have a chat with Mr. Ed Digdale."

"Not till I find a home for this last, lonesome meatball," Buster said, lunging at it with his toothpick.

The Madrid InterPresidential occupied a corner on a wide, leafy boulevard. It had amenities Buster and Carla's hotel lacked, such as a lobby and a desk clerk who was awake. Their hotel would fit inside the InterPresidential's atrium. Their room would fit in the elevator.

"Money doesn't talk," Buster said on the way up. "It screams."

Ed Digdale answered the door at Room 703. Buster guessed him to be his own age, though with considerably less wear and tear. He was dressed like a beer commercial in khakis and a pullover. He was in shape and had stylish streaks of gray in his hair and the casual good looks of a low-key playboy. Buster

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Hightower hated guys like this. Digdale's only saving grace was his chewed fingernails.

Ed Digdale showed them to a sofa in his suite. Not a room, a suite.

He muted the television and said, "I appreciate your coming on such short notice. I'm impressed that Unity has representatives in Europe."

Carla shrugged modestly. "We do our best."

"It was a terrible shock. I came home from dinner last night and my Larue was missing."

"The 1789 wine," Carla said, reading her e-mail printout.

"Yes, it was sitting here on this sofa in its case. I was all packed, preparing to leave today for home. Of course that's on hold."

"Where is home, if I may ask? A California agent wrote your policy."

"Originally near San Jose."

"As in Silicon Valley?"

"Now I have a villa in southern Spain, on the coast."

La-di-da. Trying to make himself un-useful, Buster turned his attention to the TV. A soccer game was on. Soccer, which they call football in Europe, he thought, recalling his new set.

Carla had her notebook out, all business. "May I ask why you had such a valuable object in the room?"

"I had just finished appearing at a wine cellar trade show in Barcelona."

"Excuse me?"

"Wine cellars. You could regard them as sophisticated coolers."

"You don't have to excavate a hole under your house?" Buster asked.

Ed Digdale smiled indulgently. "No. Wine cellars can be small and freestanding. Or they can be vaults that are custom integrated into a home. You can pay as little as two hundred dollars, or as much as you want. The objective is temperature and humidity control and security for your fine vintages. It's a growing industry."

What's wrong with the fridge or a shelf in the garage? Buster wondered.

"You made an appearance?" Carla asked.

"Yes, the Larue is quite an attraction. I'm paid expenses and a modest honorarium to attend viticulture functions."

A jug of spoiled grape juice that cost three hundred grand, Buster thought. Freak show is more like it. The soccer game was a scoreless tie between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. They were kicking the ball around, not getting much accomplished.

"Were there signs of a break-in?" Carla asked.

"No."

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"Other belongings missing?"

"No. Whoever did this knew what they wanted and had been observing me. The hotel refuses to accept responsibility. They say I must have been careless with my key card and that they're not responsible for valuables I didn't check with them. The police weren't very sympathetic either, or helpful."

Carla asked, "How did you transport the wine?"

"In a hard suitcase with a cushioned plastic cutout. It could be dropped out a ten-story window and the contents wouldn't break."

Carla thanked Digdale for his time and said the company would be in contact soon.

"Time to hand this thing off, toots," Buster said out on the street.

"I know. After I call Unity."

"Think Digdale's in on it?" Buster said.

Carla stopped at a telephone kiosk. "You have a dirty mind."

"Ain't insurance claims like when a spouse is murdered? The other spouse is the prime suspect till ruled out."

"Interesting way of putting it," Carla said. "Digdale's room is on the seventh floor. Even with extra height for the lobby, that's less than ten floors to the ground and to somebody waiting with a car."

"Except I noticed you can't open the windows in his room."

Carla had given a number to an English-speaking operator. "Maybe I'm misjudging you. You're not a natural insurance agent, you're a detective."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"I'm calling June, the secretary to Unity's claims manager," she said while waiting for the phone to be picked up. "She does all the work there anyway— Oh, hi, June, Carla Chance. You do know about Digdale? I just interviewed him."

While Carla told her tale, Buster people-watched and tried to pin down what else was bugging him. He saw a billboard. The soccer player endorsing a shoe was scoring a goal. The billboard picture was taken in the daytime. That was it. The game on Digdale's TV was under lights. It was either a rerun or taped.

Carla finished on the phone and said, "I knew 'Digdale' was familiar. Digdale Software."

"Isn't he too old to be a dot-com pipsqueak?"

"Digdale Software is a leading video game maker. Galactic Cannibals is their most famous. It sold in the jillions."

"Don't kids play marbles any more?" Buster said. "Checkers? Mumbletypeg?"

"Ed Digdale is a weird twist on the trust fund kid. The Digdale game czar is his son, Dale Digdale. Ed is a trust fund *dad.*"

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"What did he do before his boy put him out to pasture?"

"June's researching that. She'll e-mail me."

"Whoa. I thought you were bailing out, Carla."

"Well, I was, but the claims manager is tied up in court."

"Testifying on a claim?"

"Being indicted. June spared me the fine details."

Buster thought, okay, fine. If Carla's busy on the Digdale claim, she won't be dragging him to museums and cathedrals. He'd do some researching of his own, namely tapas bars. He'd pursue the wild tapa till he crawled onto the airplane.

They returned to their hotel room. The phone was ringing when they walked in; Buster answered it.

"If you want to see the Larue in one piece, it will cost you one hundred thousand euros." The woman sounded like either an American faking a Spanish accent or a Spaniard speaking accented English. He couldn't tell which.

He handed the phone to Carla. "It's for you."

"Yes," Carla said after a pause. "Yes." She began taking notes. "Yes, yes . . . I'll have to go to the insurance company and the owner."

Carla gasped. "You wouldn't! . . . Hello? Hello?"

Carla dropped the receiver and said, "She threatened to tear off a piece of the label and have it delivered to me if I didn't believe her."

"Like a kidnapper mailing you an ear," Buster said. "These winenappers are just as vicious."

"The ransom demand is over a hundred thousand dollars at the current exchange rate. She gave Unity twenty-four hours from now to come up with the money. Do we have a subway map? We're to rendezvous with her at the Bilbao station then."

"Or what? She breaks the bottle, it'll be worth nothing to nobody."

"Good point. And how did she know me? I'm going to e-mail June. If Unity wishes me to continue, I want it in writing."

In Buster's mind a cybercafe was totally useless. The only thing they had to eat was snacks out of machines.

Typing away, Carla got excited and told Buster that June was responding as she wrote her. They were communicating in *real time.*

"Yeah?" Buster said. "What's not-real time? It's got artificial ingredients added in?"

"June says her boss is back in the office, released on bail. He said he has no problem if Digdale pays the ransom."

"That's generous of him."

"There's more. June contacted the agent in California who wrote the policy. He proved to be a wealth of Digdale gossip. Ed

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Digdale was a former Unity agent himself specializing in financial instruments, IRAs, et cetera, before being defrocked for various hanky-panky. Get this, Ed embezzled Dale Digdale. They presume son bought father out of his life."

"So, the black sheep of the family's the oldest critter in the flock."

"He has all the bad playboy habits. Women, booze, gambling. He hangs on the fringes of an affluent crowd of wine fanciers, and the word's out that he's nearly broke. Digdale overpaid at the wine auction, maybe to impress a woman. He wanted to own the world's most expensive *something*. And get this, Buster. The next highest price ever paid for a bottle of wine was a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. Digdale couldn't possibly make his money back legitimately if he sold or auctioned it."

"So how come the insurance's gotta pay the three hundred and twelve thousand?"

"Because it was scheduled for that amount and Digdale paid the premium."

"That's dumb."

"Digdale had connections in Unity's underwriting department and got it covered. Unity P. and C. is stuck."

Buster said, "Let's go find out if a hundred grand in change fell out of his pockets into the sofa cushions in that fancy hotel room."

"I received virtually the same phone call. Of course I'll pay."

"You will?" Buster said, glancing at Ed Digdale's freshly chewed nails.

"She's undoubtedly a stooge for a gang," Digdale said. "That's only a third of what I paid for the Larue. The insurance company will reimburse me, won't they?"

Carla fluttered a palm. "Well, we're in a gray area there."

"They had better pay," Digdale snapped. "I'll deal with it later. Freeing my Larue quickly is most crucial. The longer my wine is in the hands of these criminals, the greater the risk it could be harmed."

"Who makes the switcheroo?" Buster asked.

Carla said, "Well, I got the impression she meant me, as representative of Unity Property and Casualty."

"No way," Buster said.

Carla kneaded his shoulder. "It'll be okay, Buster. Besides, this is a thing you usually only get to see in a movie, not actually participate in. It'll be fine. It'll be daytime. This is a crowded public place, isn't it, Mr. Digdale?"

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"Jeez. My girlfriend's turned into Nancy Drew."

Digdale nodded. "And I'll be there with you."

Carla and Buster slept and slept and slept. They awoke the following day with time to kill. Carla hauled him to a museum with the promise that he could graze tapas bars to his heart's content after the Digdale business was done.

"This is a modern art museum," Buster said. "These artists—every one of them has been dead at least twenty years."

"Shhh," Carla said.

"How come the pictures don't look like anything? This one here, it looks like a side order of potato salad."

"Shhh. You're going to get us booted out."

"And your problem with that is?"

"Buster, I know you're worrying about me and you're uptight. I'll be fine."

"We should be notifying the FBI."

"Buster, this is Spain, not America. This is wine, not a person."

"If I don't like what's coming down, I'm gonna do something."

"What?"

"Beats the hell out of me."

It was while waiting outside the Madrid InterPresidential that Buster went into the alley, came back, and said, "Just as I thought. The room windows don't open, but the ones in the hall do. Eddie Boy could've dropped that baby down to a waiting car."

"I wouldn't wager the mortgage that he's not a crook, Buster. Proving it is another matter."

Ed Digdale came out of the lobby with an attaché case and a cell phone. "It wasn't easy raising this much cash on short notice. The criminals had the phone delivered to me. They'll call when we get off at Bilbao and tell us where to meet."

At the nearest metro station, they walked down steps to the boarding platform.

Buster asked, "Hey, Ed, who won that soccer game you had on yesterday?"

"Are you a soccer fan?"

"I've been into football lately," Buster said vaguely.

"Barcelona, one-nil."

"Was that okay with you?"

Digdale averted his eyes. "It was a good game. Why should I care about the result?"

Madrid's subway system was fast and efficient. At the second

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station, they transferred to another line. The first stop was Bilbao. As they stepped off the car, Digdale's phone rang.

He listened for a moment and said, "Up the stairs. The entrance is at a traffic circle, a *glorieta*. We'll be contacted there."

"The same woman?" Carla asked.

"Yes." Digdale gave her the attaché case. "Hurry. We'll be behind you at the top of the steps."

They emerged at a traffic island clogged with people waiting to cross to adjoining streets.

"A public place," Buster said.

"Amen," Carla said.

An attractive Spanish woman in her thirties suddenly blocked Carla's path. She was carrying a suitcase. The woman was a size four and dressed in designer jeans and an expensive leather coat. She had high-altitude cheekbones and deer-in-the-headlights eyes.

You're no more experienced at this than I am, Carla thought. She said, "Your move, honey."

Buster lurched toward Carla, almost knocking Digdale down when Digdale tried to stop him. Buster grabbed the attaché case Carla was holding and flicked the latches. The lid flopped open and a folded newspaper fell to the ground. The other woman then dropped her suitcase, sidestepped through traffic, and vanished.

"That wasn't part of the plan," Carla said.

"We didn't have a plan," Buster said.

"My baby," Digdale said, embracing the suitcase.

They didn't open it until they returned to Ed Digdale's room. What they discovered wasn't good news.

"There there," Carla said, patting Digdale's back while he buried his face in his hands.

The 1789 Château Larue rested on the coffee table, cork halfway inserted, wine level below that.

"Barbarians," Digdale said, sobbing through his fingers. "They violated my Larue and *drank* it."

Buster couldn't resist. He uncorked the bottle, sniffed, and took a swig.

Carla covered her mouth to suppress snickers.

"This wine's worth more dead than alive," Buster said.

Digdale looked up. "What's that mean?"

Buster swigged again, belched softly, and said, "Kinda sour, but I've tasted worse. Soft and approachable, though. What I mean is, you couldn't get half of what you paid for it before the wine tasting party. Now you collect the full amount of the policy. Pretty slick, huh?"

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"Buster, try to be a little sensitive."

"We've already alerted Interpol," Buster bluffed. "They're checking into you and your girlfriend."

"This is outrageous," Digdale cried. "What are you suggesting?"

Carla followed Buster's bad cop–good cop lead. "Mr. Digdale, I must apologize for Mr. Hightower. He's suffering from jet lag and overindulgence in tapas. The alcohol content of that old vintage must be sky high too. Buster, please put that bottle down."

"Quit the drama club routine, Ed, and tell us how much you lost on that soccer game."

Digdale didn't reply.

"Judging by what's left of your fingernails, a bunch, I'll bet. Pun intended."

"I'm consulting a lawyer," Digdale told Carla.

"Oh my goodness," she said. "Please work with me, sir. Buster, shut up."

"Let's see," Buster said. "The suitcase'll handle a long fall. The hallway windows open—nah, that's too much trouble. That's what you wanted us to believe. One of your red herons. That's why you said ten stories. That little gal at the subway, she maybe carried it out of the room, huh? She a steady gal, Eddie, or did you hire her at that wine cellar thing you were just at?"

Digdale stood up. "I want you both out of here immediately."

Carla stood up, took a paper from her purse, and gave it to him. "I am so so sorry, Mr. Digdale. Buster has never behaved this badly before."

"What's this?"

"A proof of loss form Unity e-mailed me. By signing and having it notarized, you're swearing that your claim is truthful and accurate. Once you send it to the company, they'll begin processing your claim."

"Swearing?"

"Like on a stack of Bibles," Buster said.

"A figure of speech," Carla said sweetly.

"I'll have my attorney study it. You can expect a defamation of character lawsuit also."

"You're a defamable character, that's for sure."

"Buster!"

"Carla, don't forget to tell Fast Eddie that a copy of your report is going to Interpol and the Madrid gendarmes."

Digdale looked at Carla.

She smiled. "An official investigation is routine, Mr. Digdale."

"Out."

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"Have a nice day," Buster said from the door.

At Buster's choice of tapas bars, the first one they came to, Carla said, "What got into you?"

"Huh?"

She rolled her eyes. "For openers, that stunt at the rendezvous."

He sampled mushrooms sautéed in olive oil. "Yum. Guess I panicked. I don't trust Eddie further than I can throw myself. If there was gonna be a fuss, I'd rather it be then and there, not after you were shoved into a car. If the gal wasn't in on it with him and saw she'd been cheated—Carla, it was you on the front line."

"That's incredibly sweet, Buster, but that poor woman just cut her losses, don't you think?"

"Yep."

"Through his Unity contacts, Digdale learned that the sales winner would be in Madrid. Perhaps that's when he got his bright idea and sweet-talked her into the act. She and Digdale saw to it that the wine was rendered valueless. He had a claim for damages regardless. He probably thought Unity would reimburse him for the fictitious hundred thousand."

"Some people got a lot of nerve."

Carla shrugged. "Your act in the room?"

"Not an act. I don't like the bleeping bleeper. Besides, I thought you'd pick up on it, us being whadayacallit, telepathological."

"Reading each other's minds?"

"There you go, Carla. You did it again."

At their Madrid hotel, as they waited for a taxi to the airport and home, Carla said, "I went out and pulled up e-mail while you were in the shower. Did I tell you, I'm getting a letter of appreciation from Unity?"

"Digdale?"

"Nary a peep out of him. June doesn't think he has the moxie to pursue a claim."

"Don't you think there oughta be a reward too?"

"Unity did spring for our full hotel bill."

"Yeah, my knees get weak from the thought. What I mean, is cash money kicked in?"

"Buster, this is the insurance industry we're talking about here."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. How about they show real gratitude? Insure me and my Caddy."

Carla kissed his cheek. "They appreciate your assistance, Buster. They can't grant you a miracle."

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JUNK AND DISORDERLY

SHERRARD GRAY

As Corporal Wayne Valley stepped into Junk & Disorderly, instead of a tinkling bell, a few bars of the Beatles's "Together" played. Moments later a door in the far corner of the antiques shop opened and a woman with mounded red hair came into the room, wiping her hands on a rag. This must be Didi Zervos, whom Chief Moodie had told him about, a young tigress married to a seventy-two-year-old millionaire, Orestes Zervos. The woman tossed her rag onto a Shaker coat rack and gave him an appraising glance. Noticing that the top two buttons of her blouse were undone, revealing a generous cleavage, Wayne blushed and looked away.

"You're the new police officer."

"Wayne Valley, ma'am."

"You're very brave coming here, Mr. Valley. I'm afraid the police department in Flinns Lick has a high turnover. Two officers resigned in just the past month." She came around the coat rack and stood so close he could smell varnish remover on her hands. "Are you interested in antiques?"

"Yes, ma'am. My uncle runs an antiques store in Bennington. I've helped him move things, stuff like that. I'm looking for something for my mother's fiftieth birthday."

"Which means you're probably about twenty-eight, right?"

"Thirty. Ma'am."

"I'm only two years older so you don't have to make me feel like a wrinkled dowager by calling me ma'am. Call me Didi. Or, if that's too hard, Mrs. Zervos."

Wayne had no idea what a dowager was, but Mrs. Zervos sure didn't look wrinkled. As he worked hard to keep his eyes away from her chest, something red flashed on her hand: a ruby so bright it looked like it was plugged in.

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"That's a beautiful stone, ma'am. I mean Mrs. Zervos."

She raised her hand, the ring flashing like a beacon. "It is beautiful—but it comes with a terrible curse."

"A curse?"

"Yes. Mr. Zervos."

Wayne didn't know what to say. He had been in Flinns Lick, a dairy and logging town of twelve hundred near the Canadian border, less than a week, but already he was beginning to think his buddy Skip at the police academy was right. He had worked hard at the academy but still placed in the bottom half of his class and was not able to get the job he wanted, a full-time position in Bennington. About the only full-time job available to him was in this town in the remote northeast corner of Vermont. "You're going to Flinns Lick?" Skip had said. "Good luck, buddy, you'll need it."

He thought it might be a good idea to change the subject with Mrs. Zervos. Looking around, he spotted a grandfather clock. It was five feet tall, made of polished oak, with an uppermost finial in the shape of a maple tree. Red and yellow leaves were etched on the glass. His mother would go nuts over this.

Mrs. Zervos was watching him. "Why don't you look around at your leisure, because that's what antiques are all about, right? Holler if you need anything. I'm working on a piece in the next room." Retrieving her rag, she returned to her workshop.

He admired the clock, and then with a sigh turned away, knowing that its price must be well beyond his means. He wandered about, taking in a walnut breakfront, a piecrust table on which stood a porcelain centerpiece of an old man with a sack bending over a clump of mushrooms (Mom would like that too, not as much as the clock, but it might be affordable), Japanese prints of people in suggestive poses, which he quickly passed by. He paused at a window overlooking a sawmill that extended behind the shop and that seemed to be closed; the only sign of life in the mill on this Saturday afternoon was a large yellow cat squatting on a pile of spruce logs.

The workshop door opened again and Mrs. Zervos reappeared. "Finished the first coat. See anything you like?"

"Sure did. That grandfather clock. My mother would love it, but I'm afraid it's beyond my means."

"Tell you what, it's yours for seventy-five."

"Dollars? It must be worth a lot more."

With a sigh, Mrs. Zervos leaned against the breakfront. "It's in your eyes, Mr. Valley. People come in here with wads of money

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but no love, no dancing in their eyes. They think, That'll look good in my living room. That'll impress my friends. It's a pleasure to meet someone like you."

He wrote out a check and handed it to her. "I have to be on duty in fifteen minutes. You're not open tomorrow by any chance?"

She shook her head, went to a roll-top desk in a corner, and came back holding a key on a string. "You can leave this off with me on Monday."

"You're going to leave your key with me? Just like that?"

Mrs. Zervos laughed puckishly. "No, not just like that. You're going to have to work for it." She dangled the key over her bosom and dropped it. "There. Go fetch."

"Mrs. Zervos," whispered Wayne, "I can't do that."

Her eyes held his. He had never met anyone like this before. He had had a girlfriend in Bennington, but she was the opposite of Mrs. Zervos. She was a children's librarian and didn't even like him to use the word *damn*. Of course it no longer mattered that much what Amyanne liked—last fall, when he was still a mechanic at Mike's Gulf, she had met a man with much better prospects, a high school history teacher with an M.A., and it was So long, Wayne. Standing now only two feet from Mrs. Zervos, heart thumping, he felt a dizzying recklessness take over and was about to reach for the key, wherever it was, when she laughed and fished it out of her décolletage.

Holy moly, he thought, I was going to go after it myself. This place is rubbing off on me already.

Fifteen minutes later he was in uniform in the police station. Chief Orville Moodie, who was fifty-two and looked sixty, was throwing darts at a poster of the Blob, a charcoal-drawn creature with warts, fangs, and one ear missing. There were four desks in the squad room, all in various states of disrepair; Moodie's was the worst of the lot. One leg of his desk was propped up on a firearm manual, one corner had been badly chewed by something. Probably by a beaver, Wayne thought, wouldn't surprise me if they came in here at night.

Flinns Lick was budgeted for four full-time officers, and since two had recently quit, that left only Wayne, Chief Moodie, and Lieutenant Doris Sartelle, who was on compassionate leave in Chicago to be with her dying father. The hours, and there were many, not covered by the FLPD were covered by the county sheriff.

"I'll see you Monday," said Moodie. "Should be a quiet night. You might have to break up a fight or two, throw someone in the tank

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downstairs to sober up, but nothing major should happen. If it does, don't call me. Here's this week's *Reporter* in case you want to read about what's going on in town. By the way, we've got a helper, a twelve-year-old kid named Crystal. She'll probably come in tomorrow, clean this dump up a little. Sweep the floor, empty the wastebaskets, straighten out my files, stuff like that. It's a long story, but her father used to beat on her and her mother Vicki Miller. He took off a year ago and hasn't been heard from since. Vicki drives a fifteen-year-old clunker and the bank's been making noises about repossessing their house, so Crystal works here, picks up a few extra dollars. She's smart as a whip too. Matter of fact, she drew the Blob for me."

Wayne thought of his own father who'd left home when he was three. "You're serious about not calling you if something big happens?"

Moodie cocked his arm for a parting shot at the Blob. "Don't believe everything I say. Don't believe anything I say. Yeah, call me." He threw; the dart missed completely and stuck in the spine of *Vermont Statutes Annotated, Vol. I.* "Damn bursitis," he said, rubbing his right shoulder. "It would have to be in my throwing arm."

When the chief left, Wayne picked up the paper and read about eighth graders planting saplings on Main Street, a town truck blowing a transmission, and two upcoming farm auctions. Like other towns in Vermont, Flinns Lick was rapidly losing its family dairy farms and was searching for a new identity. As he leafed through the sports section, a name caught his eye. Under the photograph of a blocky, sour-faced woman in a baseball uniform, the caption read: "Vicki Miller wins another one for the Hush Puppies with two home runs and a triple." So that was Crystal's mom? Poor kid: father an abuser, mother looked like a sumo wrestler. In fact, she looked a little like the Blob, which puzzled Wayne: How could a guy abuse *that*?

Around suppertime he decided to walk down Main to the Lucky Life Cafe ten blocks away and let any rowdies know that Flinns Lick might only have two full-time cops in town, but one was on duty.

A brisk wind had come up and he had to lean into it and hold his hat. As he approached the antiques shop, a man in a soiled T-shirt clutching a bag of potato chips stepped out of The Flood Zone, a bar next to the shop, and started weaving toward him. Ten feet away, Wayne could smell him, and it wasn't fragrant. He moved out of the way, but at the last minute the drunk lurched sideways, bumping into him and spilling chips onto the sidewalk.

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"Easy does it, fellow," said Wayne. "Watch the littering too."

"Gracious, can't have that, can we?" The man scooped up the chips and dumped them in a trash barrel.

Backing away from the guy's b.o., which even the thirty-mile-per-hour wind couldn't dissipate, Wayne, feeling in a humorous mood, pointed to a chip that had blown across the street. "You missed one."

The drunk widened his eyes as if appalled and put a finger to his lips. "If you don't tell no one, I won't neither," he said, and with a wink he ambled off down the sidewalk.

Passing Junk & Disorderly, Wayne glanced in the window and saw Mrs. Zervos at the roll-top desk going over paperwork

He had the meat loaf platter at the diner, bantered with the talkative, sixtyish waitress, and returned to the station. At nine he took another stroll, going the other way up Main, bordering the Lamoille River. Aside from the one bar, the town seemed quiet for a Saturday night: a few kids on skateboards, couples going into the Wok 'n' Roll Chinese restaurant, a dance at the Foreign Legion Hall. People were friendly, several even stopped to shake his hand and wish him well. A small town minding its own business.

Back in the station, he was beginning to think his buddy at the academy was wrong. Sure, Flinns Lick had some unusual characters, like Didi Zervos with her unbuttoned blouse, and Moodie with his darts, but that only made life more interesting. He might just settle down here.

Five minutes later, everything changed. The town dispatcher, who covered police, fire, rescue, and gossip from her home, called to report a code 245 at Junk & Disorderly.

Looking at the code list taped to his desk, Wayne felt his stomach drop: 245 was assault with a deadly weapon. As he peeled out of the station's parking lot, an ambulance siren sounded from the rescue squad's garage on the other side of the river. Driving down Main, he saw lights on inside the antiques shop. He pulled up to the curb and jumped out of the cruiser. No one seemed to be about, then he heard a groan and saw a white-haired gentleman standing in the shadows of the doorway, his face ashen.

"It's Didi. Her head . . . I can't get a pulse."

The man identified himself as Orestes Zervos, Didi's husband. When she hadn't come home by nine forty-five, he had driven from their home in Mountainview Heights to the shop. Wayne followed Zervos inside and saw a figure on the floor, one arm outspread. Didi's mounded red hair was drenched with blood. The face that had gazed at him so saucily only seven hours ago was

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lifeless and gray. Zervos fell to his knees as two women from rescue rushed in with oxygen and a stretcher. One of the EMTs bent over the victim, a hand on her wrist; after a minute, she straightened, shaking her head.

Chief Moodie arrived, then the state police and assistant M.E., who pronounced Mrs. Zervos dead. The building was sealed off, photographs taken. One of the three windows facing the sawmill had been broken from the outside and opened. A blood-smeared brass candlestick lying on the floor by the body was put into an evidence bag by a technician from the crime lab in Elizabethville.

After the body had been removed, a shaken Wayne sealed off an area in back of the shop with stakes and a police ribbon, and he and Chief Moodie searched the ground with flashlights, finding no tracks directly under the broken window, only trampled grass, but they did find fresh tire tracks in the dirt at the edge of the mill yard belonging to a car or pickup with nearly bald tires. As Chief photographed the tracks, Wayne, unable to hold it in any longer, went behind a stack of lumber and was sick. Throwing up during a murder investigation was not a promising start, and he was thinking he should go back to auto mechanics when a hand touched his shoulder.

"I guess I'm not really up to this job, Chief."

"You're human, aren't you?" A faint wash of light from Junk & Disorderly fell on the lined face. "I'd rather have a human being working for me than a robot."

Wayne sleeved his face. "I stopped in here this afternoon to get something for my mother. Mrs. Zervos showed me around, sold me a grandfather clock for almost nothing. Such a friendly, funny, surprising woman. I just can't believe she's gone." He shook his head, overcome with sadness and frustration.

The next morning Charlie from the crime lab called to say they hadn't found any usable prints on the broken window and that the killer must have wiped his, or her, prints off the candlestick. He said it looked like Mrs. Zervos had been surprised and didn't have time to resist because the coroner hadn't found any of the perp's blood or skin under her fingernails. He mentioned one odd thing, though—her right hand was clutching a mushroom.

"A mushroom?" Wayne said when Chief Moodie relayed Charlie's report.

"One of those porcelain jobbies we found on the floor. Poor thing, in her dying moments reaching out for anything." Shaking his head, Orville Moodie sat on a windowsill. "Okay, so we know

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the perp climbed through a window, stole two or three snuffboxes and a ruby ring worth thousands. We know he bludgeoned Didi with a brass candlestick. She probably saw who it was, since he hit her from in front, but that won't do us any good since she's dead. Apparently she didn't have time to put up a fight. Zervos says she was in her workroom staining a bureau—the light was on, paintbrush still wet. The only window in that room faces the street and the vent is near the ceiling and louvered, so the perp, sneaking up from the mill yard, probably didn't even know she was there. He figured to steal those snuffboxes, which are easy to carry and worth thousands, and slip away, but she hears him, comes in to investigate, and he pops her and gets an unexpected bonus, the famous Zervos ring."

The chief's radio crackled. He talked briefly to the dispatcher and pushed off from the sill. "Accident on Shincracker Road, a boom truck and a pickup. I'll check it out, maybe you could go back to the mill and look for tracks. There's gotta be a fresh tire track back there, a shoe print, something. Go inside too. We got permission from Zervos—who I still think is our man—to go in there until we find something or give up, which ain't gonna happen. Give up, I mean."

Half an hour later, Wayne was combing the ground near the tire tracks for a footprint when he heard a squeak of metal behind him and turned to see a young girl on a bicycle.

"Didn't you see the police ribbon, young lady?"

She stared at him with dark, almost black eyes and then looked behind her at the yellow ribbon strung on stakes. One of the stakes had toppled over in the wind and she had ridden over the ribbon. "Guess I'm supposed to be behind it, aren't I?" She walked her bike back over the ribbon and leaned it against the stack of lumber behind which Wayne had been sick the night before; then she righted the stake.

"Wait a minute," said Wayne, "are you Crystal Miller?" The girl nodded. "Mr. Moodie told me about you, so I guess you're okay. Probably ought to stay behind the ribbon though."

He continued his search, back and forth over the dirt, which showed old tractor trailer and forklift tracks and places where pallets had lain. Suddenly he stopped, his heart skidding. He had come to a fresh shoe print, with some foreign-looking writing. He made out an A then two letters that looked like reverse L's, a reverse R and reverse G. Holy moly, could this be Greek? Had Orestes Zervos been feigning those grief-stricken groans last night?

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He took a photograph of the print, while Crystal Miller watched from behind the ribbon. "You know any foreign languages?" he asked her.

"I can say *bonjour* in French."

"Does this look like Greek to you?"

Crystal stepped over the ribbon. "You can't read it like that, you know."

He glared at her.

"Are you going to arrest me?"

That did it. The tension and fatigue that had been building up in him spilled over into laughter. He had been taking himself too seriously. He unsnapped the cuffs from his belt and walked toward the twelve year old, who shifted into a karate pose and started growling.

"You know karate?"

"Not really, but my mom does. She's got a black belt."

I can believe it, he thought, remembering the scowling, tank-shaped woman whose picture he'd seen in the *Reporter*. "So how do you read footprints?"

"You got a screwdriver?"

Of course. Why hadn't he thought of that? That's how you read a shoe print, at least in Flinns Lick, with a screwdriver. "As a matter of fact, I do have a screwdriver." He handed her his Swiss Army knife, watched her walk back to her balloon-tired bike. There was a rasp of rusty metal, and a minute later she came back with her rearview mirror and held it over the print. Reflected in the glass was: GOR L A.

"Doesn't look Greek, does it?" he said.

Crystal was studying the letters. Her head came up, a dawning light in her eyes. "Gorilla work shoes. They sell 'em at Bear's Mart. My grandfather used to wear them," she said, adding hastily, "He didn't do it though."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure. He died two years ago."

"Gorilla?" Moodie said, pulling another dart out of *Vermont Statutes Annotated, Vol. I*, which had been hit so many times it had developed a terminal case of literary eczema. "You could check with Bear, see who he's sold them to lately. That photograph shows the tread hasn't been worn down much so they're probably pretty new." He threw a dart at the Blob, just missing the missing ear. "Don't laugh. You never know when throwing darts might come in handy. The way the world's going, we could be back in

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the Stone Age before long. Go see Bear. I got to go to a district chiefs' meeting, one of those things where you catch up on your sleep." As Chief walked toward the poster, he muttered, "Blob, your days are numbered."

Wayne had to stifle a laugh. Here was this middle-aged, happily married man—at least he seemed happily married, a twinkle appeared in his eye every time he mentioned his wife—two grown children, three grandkids and more on the way, acting like a ten-year-old kid. Oh well, that was Flinns Lick.

You could get everything at Bear's Mart, a sprawling ramshackle building at the edge of the business district, from groceries to Maverick jeans to pump-action shotguns. While waiting at the counter to talk to Bear, Wayne was bumped from behind, and turned to see a familiar face: the stocky softball player whose photograph he'd seen in the *Reporter*, Crystal's mother, Vicki Miller. She glared at him as if the collision was his fault, and kept going.

"Yes sir," said a man in a bow tie, one hand on the register, circa 1950s, as the customer ahead of Wayne moved on, "what can I do you out of today? Name's Bear Marckres." He stuck out a friendly paw.

Wayne asked if he'd sold any Gorilla work shoes lately.

"Gorilla, Gorilla, Gor-rill-a," sang Bear, jiggling his bowtie with his hand. "Gorilla is the best fit. In this town it's made a hit." He stopped singing. "Somebody put a muzzle on me. Tragic about Didi. I liked that woman. Some of the self-righteous around here were worried about her flamboyant personality, but life's short, what're you supposed to do, count your beads and mutter all day about the world going to pot? Didi was definitely not a world's-going-to-pot person. Does this have anything to do with her? Of course, you can't say. I'm sure we've sold some Gorilla shoes this past year, but we don't keep a record of who buys what, but you could try Flip upstairs."

The shoe clerk, Flip, rubbed his bald head, sucked on his teeth, and said, "Gorilla shoes? I've prolly sold four or five pairs the past year. Don't remember to who though."

At least Flip didn't sing. On the way out, Wayne had to walk around Mrs. Miller, who was standing by the medicine display pawing through a shelf of antacids. She saw him coming but declined to move her ample rear, which grazed his holster. She narrowed her eyes at him and he was tempted to say, "You're not really Crystal's mother, are you? She's such a nice kid."

Walking down Main alongside a small park with some sugar

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maples and a wooden bench, he stopped dead in his tracks. The drunk with the potato chips the day before lay snoring on the bench. Did this guy ever take a bath? he wondered, his nose cowering from a smell that would make a skunk think twice. A pigeon investigating a Freihoffer's doughnut box under the bench flew off. But it was not the b.o., nor the littering, that had pulled Wayne up short; it was the guy's shoes. One foot was on the ground, but the other was on the bench, the sole in plain view showing the word GORILLA.

The bum stirred; a rheumy eye cracked open, blinked, took in the uniform. The right foot swung down and he sat up, patting the seat beside him. "Hey, Cap, how's it going? Have a seat."

"That's okay." Wayne pointed to the doughnut box. "Littering again."

"I'll take care of it, sir." The bum stood up, doughnut crumbs spilling onto the ground. Suddenly tears sprang into the bloodshot eyes and rolled down the raddled cheeks. For a full minute he stared at Wayne, unable to speak. Finally, lurching forward, he managed to say, "You're a good man," and for a horrible moment Wayne thought the bum was going to embrace him. "They killed my friend."

"Who killed your friend?"

"I don't know. I don't know." The man sank back onto the bench, sobbing. "Things just aren't right anymore."

"That's Guy Blodgett," Moodie said. "Does odd jobs, mows lawns, rakes leaves, used to drive people to the airport before he lost his license for DWI, third offense. He has an apartment on Hunter Street, the seedy end, about two blocks from Crystal and her mom. Guy's a fall-down drunk, but he's not into murder. Furthermore, he had a crush on Didi, everyone knew that. He used to hang around the store and help her move stuff. Zervos wasn't happy about it but she didn't mind. She might have been a flirt and a tease, but she had a big heart."

Moodie stared out the window for a while at Shincracker Mountain. "Guy does have a temper, though. Years ago he creased a man's skull with a crowbar in a fight over a girl, but he hasn't been in any serious trouble since."

"Maybe he flipped out. Realized the only way he could have Didi to himself was to kill her."

The salt-and-pepper brows frowned. "Sounds like psychobabble to me."

"Still, it could've been Guy," said Wayne.

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"Could've been Governor Douglas, too, but I'm betting on her husband. Here's this guy Zervos, in his seventies, two artificial hips, two artificial knees, heart bypass, cataracts, you name it, married to this thirty-year-old bombshell who flirts with every man in town, and finally his ego says, Hey enough, and he kills her. He may be a medical disaster but he can still lift a brass candlestick. He's smart so he makes it look like a robbery gone sour. So interview him, find out where he was last night around ten. After that, to make you happy, we'll take a peek in Guy's apartment."

"Can we get a search warrant just on the evidence that he wears Gorilla shoes?"

One of Moodie's darts caromed off the mini-refrigerator beside the dartboard, bending its tip. "Bursitis again. What's a search warrant?"

"Holy moly," whispered Wayne.

Moodie got up and patted his new recruit on the shoulder. "This is Flinns Lick. When he's drinking himself silly at The Flood Zone tonight, we stop by his dump, have a look-see."

Wayne found Didi's husband at his estate in Mountainview Heights. An elderly maid in a starched uniform had led him to a darkened library, where Orestes Zervos stretched out on a leather recliner with a washcloth over his eyes.

He took the cloth away and sat up, groaning. Wayne wondered again whether Zervos was grief stricken or acting.

"Sorry to bother you, sir. I'd like to extend our condolences over your terrible loss. I'm afraid, though, that we need to know where you were prior to finding your wife's body."

Another deep groan. "Here. Cooking a special meal for us, escargots and filet mignon and a Caesar salad. She'd worked so hard all week and I wanted to prepare a treat for her."

"Mr. Zervos, this may seem like an odd request, but can I see all of your shoes?"

"Good Lord, you don't think I killed my little flower?" The old man rang a bell and a minute later the maid reappeared. "Marie, please take Mr. Valley to my room and let him look around. Show him the vestibule closet, too."

A ten-minute search turned up nothing, and the maid escorted Wayne back to the library.

"Thank you, sir, for your cooperation. Do you have any idea who could've done this?"

"None. *None.* I've been wracking my brain. She was so full of

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life, so . . ." A trembling hand reached for the washcloth, dropped it on the floor; blank eyes stared at the ceiling.

Wayne nodded to the maid and left the room.

That night, a search by Wayne and Chief Moodie of Blodgett's apartment on Hunter Street produced nothing but a lot of beer bottles and some stale Hoopie Pies. To Wayne they seemed to be back on square one. He fell tiredly into bed in his two-room apartment at Mayflower Manor thinking, Flinns Lick is going to drive me nuts. An hour later a loud crash catapulted him out of the sack, blanket flying. A sonic boom? But Flinns Lick was nowhere near an airport. Another earsplitting crack, which he realized now was a gunshot in the next apartment. Pulling on his pants, he ran next door and knocked.

"Whazup?" said an irritated voice.

"The police. Open up."

The door was opened by a sleepy-eyed man in his twenties wearing boxer shorts. "Did I wake you up?" he asked. "Sorry about that but this stupid mouse in the wall was driving me crazy."

Wayne started to pinch himself, but didn't. "You shot a mouse with a rifle?"

The young man grinned. "I think I nailed the sucker too 'cause I ain't heard no gnawing since."

The next morning, Monday, Chief tried hard to keep a straight face when Wayne told him about the mouse. "How inconsiderate. Can't arrest the guy, though, he's the best mechanic in town, works on our cruisers. So what about this case? We gotta solve it." He put a foot up on his desk, his lined face turning sad. "You know what really gets me? It's that porcelain mushroom in Didi's fist. I keep thinking of her in her last moments reaching out for that thing, for anything, to hold. Man." He picked up a dart, put it down again.

At the mention of a mushroom, Crystal, washing windows with Windex and a squeegee, had turned and was looking at him.

"A mushroom," said Wayne. He wasn't sure why but suddenly he felt very tired.

Chief gave him a worried look. "You need a break, Valley. There's a rowboat out back of my place on two sawhorses. Help yourself. I can see that what-the-hell-is-going-on look in your eye and I've seen it too many times, lost too many officers. Take my advice, which you didn't ask for: When in doubt, go fishing."

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Moodie was right. Drifting around on Osgood Pond and casting with a fly rod was about as close to heaven as it got. He'd landed two rainbows, around eight inches each, but even if he'd caught nothing, being alone on this pond surrounded by tall spruce and balsam with only an occasional kingfisher's caw or a fish jumping was enough. For two hours he drifted, now and then bailing a slow leak with a Maxwell House coffee can. He watched a whitetail doe come down to the water's edge and drink. He thought about the grandfather clock Mrs. Zervos had sold him for a song and planned how he would present it to his mother. He'd sneak it into her living room and see how long before she noticed.

Toward dusk he was rowing back to the beach where he had parked, when five feet from shore the boat came to a jarring stop, causing him to topple backwards, the back of his head slamming into a thwart. Groggily, he sat up. Had he run into a submerged tree? A boulder? The Loch Ness monster?

Looking over the side, Wayne blinked. No, he thought, please, not this. He stared down at the blue top of what looked like a 1964 or '65 Pontiac GTO, he wasn't sure which and didn't care.

Moodie's big gut was jiggling like Santa's. "If I remember right, that was a '64 Pontiac. You know your cars, pal."

"I was a mechanic for eight years. That's the first car I've ever seen in a pond, though."

"There's probably a car in every pond around here, or at least a washing machine or freezer. Hell, couple years ago a guy bought a school bus for a hundred bucks, towed it to the top of a hill, and let her coast into Cole's Pond. That's a nasty bump on the back of your head. Have you had it looked at?"

"It's nothing. What about this kid, Crystal? I want to look around in back of Junk & Disorderly for tracks—I know we've been there before, but I've got a feeling there's something we missed. What if she shows up again? She's a great kid, bright and everything, but what're people going to think when they see her following me around?"

"Don't worry about it." Then for the first time, Wayne saw, or thought he saw, a glint of moisture in the grizzled eyes. "That kid hasn't had it easy. Her old man beating on her and then leaving. They don't even know where he is, get nothing from him. But don't get me started on that douchebag."

Chief stared out the window at Shincracker Mountain a full minute before turning back to Wayne. "Two things. First, it's a common practice around here to have ride-alongs: students interested

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in a career in law enforcement, ordinary citizens who want to see what our job is like. Secondly, Crystal likes you. You're, I don't know, good for her. And people around here know it. They aren't going to say anything and if they do, I'll deal with it. She might help us, too."

"Her mom won't mind? Crystal says she has a black belt in karate. I mean, holy moly, I wouldn't want to mess with her."

"Oh man." Chief got up from his desk, walked around in a small circle, his belly doing the shimmy; finally he sat down and laughed until tears rolled down his weathered cheeks. "I ain't laughed like this in over a year. One thing, though, could you come up with something besides 'holy moly'? I mean, that's something my great grandmother might have said."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. How about 'shit'?"

Wayne's jaw dropped, and Chief quickly raised his hands.

"Only kidding. How about 'horse pucky' or 'gee willikers'?" Lacing his hands behind his head, Moodie looked at his rookie for a long moment. "You're planning on staying, aren't you?"

"I . . . don't know."

Chief stared at him, frowning.

It was midafternoon when Wayne started poking around for clues in the mill yard. He had only been there fifteen minutes when Crystal, finished with school for the day, showed up on her bicycle, and this time he let her inside the police ribbon.

She was bent over the tire tracks from Saturday night that they thought belonged to the killer's vehicle. "Here's something."

Wayne came over and looked down at a set of cat tracks in the dirt. "I'll bet it's that big yellow cat lives around the mill. I saw him Saturday afternoon when I went into the shop. Uh-oh." He noticed that the tracks abruptly disappeared. "Looks like an owl or hawk got him."

"Yeah?" Crystal pointed to where the cat tracks resumed ten feet away.

"The owl must have dropped him."

"I don't think that's what happened. The tracks stop because the cat jumped onto the hood of a car, walked across it, and jumped down again."

Wayne was faced with a dilemma. It looked like the kid was right. He could ignore what she had just said or he could admit he was probably wrong. In the end, he chickened out and said, "Hmm."

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Using the key Didi had given him, Wayne and Crystal went inside, found everything as it had been Sunday morning. The broken window—Zervos or someone had put up a piece of cardboard to cover the break—bloodstains on the floor, the toppled piecrust table. Near the bloodstains lay the centerpiece with the old man and his sack, the arm holding the sack broken off, and three or four porcelain mushrooms, like the one the coroner found in Didi's fist, scattered about.

Wayne took a moment to look at the grandfather clock he had bought for his mother. He thought of the brazen look in Didi's eye as she dropped the key down her blouse. Turning away, he saw Crystal staring down at the broken centerpiece.

"That's it," she whispered. "Mushrooms."

"She wasn't poisoned, she was bludgeoned."

"I know that. Morels are a well-known mushroom around here in the fall. Old lady Morrill—spells her name M-o-r-r-i-l-l—that's who did it!"

"Whoa. What're you talking about?"

"She's in her eighties, lives across the street from the sawmill. She's meaner than a rattlesnake. Us kids call her Pruneface. She shooed me and some friends away once on Halloween when we went trick-or-treating. I'll bet anything that's who did it. Didi saw who killed her, we know that because the blow to her head was in front. Before she died she had time to grab one of the mushrooms. She was telling us who did it, Mr. Valley: old lady Morrill."

"Wayne. Or I'll call you Miss Miller. We both know one thing that we aren't saying out loud."

"What's that?"

"You're smarter than I am."

"I am not." She stamped her foot on the floor.

"The cat tracks? And now this?"

"I'm not smarter." Her expression as she gazed at him was so full of affection and trust that Wayne swallowed and looked away.

"Wayne?"

He turned.

"You're in pain, aren't you, from that boating accident? Have you had a doctor look at that bang on your head?"

"It's nothing, a scratch. So how many Morrills are there in town?"

"Not that many besides Pruneface. There's a family on the Center Road. I think there's a guy, Albert Morrill, something like that, but I don't know where he lives."

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The first Morrill they hit was Mildred Morrill, a k a Pruneface, who lived across the street from the mill.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Crystal asked as they pulled up to the curb in Wayne's cruiser. "You like it here in Flinns Lick, don't you?"

Wayne was caught off guard. "Huh? Sure."

Her dark eyes studied him suspiciously. "You'd better. Will you come to my house some day for dinner?"

"Yeah," he said, thinking, I'm sure your mother would love that, probably put a razor blade in my spaghetti.

They went up the cement walk and Crystal rang the bell. A crone with a face like an apple at the bottom of the barrel, followed by a great Dane the size of a small pony, opened the door. The dog's teeth were bared and it was growling. The old lady was growling too, as she looked at Crystal.

"Mrs. Morrill?" said Wayne. "I'm Wayne Valley of the Flinns Lick Police Department. You've heard about Didi Zervos, I'm sure."

Mrs. Morrill said nothing, waiting.

"The killer came through a window in back of Junk & Disorderly, and we were wondering, since you have a view of sawmill, whether you saw or heard anything suspicious Saturday night?"

"Mr. Valley, I don't spend my time looking out the window at that dismal scene. I was in the living room reading the Bible. Something you might try sometime, young lady," she said, looking at Crystal. "As for Mrs. Zervos, I've tried to shed copious tears over that tramp but for some reason they haven't come." Her beady eyes went back to Crystal. "A little young to be helping the police, aren't you?" She shut the door in their faces.

Crystal gave the closed door the finger, then noticed Mrs. Morrill glowering at them through the fanlight.

Biting his lip to keep from laughing, Wayne walked back down the path. He dropped her off at the station so she could help Chief clean out his files. The other day she had found a two-year-old Red Sox program and an Ames flyer among the criminal records and State Police circulars. "Much as I like your company," Wayne told her, "I'd better check out the other Morrills on my own."

The family on the Center Road was more welcoming. The father, a young man in a tattered cowboy hat, was greasing a haybine in the barnyard. He greeted Wayne cheerfully, said he was glad to make his acquaintance. The kids swarmed around the new officer, staring at his .357 Magnum, billy club, radio, and all the

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other hardware he had to lug around. A young woman came over from the garden wiping her hands on her coveralls, and asked if he'd like a cup of coffee.

Inside the house, he was having such a good time meeting the family, their two dogs, three cats, and four gerbils, that he almost forgot why he was there. The idea of anyone in this family committing murder was so outlandish that he didn't bother to ask any questions about Didi. Finally, he rose, said how much he had enjoyed meeting them, and left.

The last Morrill in Flinns Lick was a single man living in a trailer near Osgood Pond. Chief knew him. "He used to work at the sawmill, was fired for fighting with another employee. Working in the mill yard, he could have looked through one of those windows, seen the snuffboxes, not to mention Didi's ruby ring. Or he could have gone inside when it was open, browsed around."

Wayne drove along Pond Road and came to a blue trailer with two hound dogs chained to fifty-five-gallon oil drums tipped on their sides. One window was boarded up with plywood; the porch steps looked lethal. A pickup with an empty gun rack in the back window stood in the yard.

Standing outside the trailer, he could hear ragged snores coming from somewhere deep inside. He wandered over to the pickup, started to say "Holy moly," and caught himself. A set of muddy cat tracks ambled across the hood.

"This is too much," said Moodie. "A set of cat tracks on a guy's truck proves he was parked behind J & D the night Didi was murdered? Well, why not?"

"You can see in the mill yard where the cat's strolling along minding its own business and then the tracks disappear and ten feet later reappear. You know how cats like to jump on stuff just for the heck of it."

"I love it," said Moodie.

"So we need a search warrant."

"Good idea. I'll give Judge Haskell a ring."

"Do you think he'll give us a warrant on the basis of those tracks and the mushroom in Didi's fist?"

"Do you know what they call a lawyer with an IQ of fifty?"

"No idea."

"Your Honor." Chief added quickly, "Actually, Haskell's no dummy. There's something else about him though." He looked around as if afraid someone might be eavesdropping, and with the

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point of his dart motioned Wayne closer. In a whisper, he said, "Judge Haskell is a great judge, right? Very learned, firm, compassionate, everything you want in a judge. But he has one small weakness." Moodie held his hand as if grasping a bottle and raised it to his mouth. "The other day I caught him driving erratically. Didn't write him up. Yes, I think he'll give us a search warrant."

The snoring kept on. Moodie knocked harder. "We may need dynamite to wake this idjit up." He knocked again and still no response. With his good arm, Chief jerked on the door, which screeched and rattled. He yanked harder and this time the door, with an unearthly howl, came off its hinges and crashed onto the porch, allowing the two officers to step into a combination living room–kitchen with dirty dishes piled in the sink and greasy chain-saw parts scattered on the floor. The snoring had been replaced by a phlegmy cough emanating from the back of the trailer. Footsteps sounded in the hallway, a bleary "Whosit?"

"The police."

The footsteps started going in the opposite direction. The two cops ran to the head of the hallway in time to see a skinny, bare-chested man duck into a closet.

"Gee," said Chief in a loud voice, "I wonder where Mr. Morrill went. It's like he vanished into thin air. Do you think we should go home and forget it? Well lookee here, looks like a door to a closet. You don't suppose he could be in there, do you?" Moodie knocked politely. "Hello? Mr. Morrill? Are you in there by any chance?" He cocked an ear, listening. "Guess not. Wait, what do I hear?"

A muffled cough came from inside the closet, and Moodie jerked open the door. Coat hangers clattered as the shirtless man staggered out, hacking into his fist. Bloodshot eyes blinked at the search warrant in Chief's hand.

"You want to tell us where the snuffboxes and Didi's ring are?" demanded Moodie, and then with a frown turned to his partner. "What'd you say?"

"His rights. Miranda."

"What's that, some kind of Mexican music? As I was saying, Mr. Morrill, you want to show us where the stuff is or do we tear the place apart looking for them?" He shoved Morrill into the living room, looked around at the peeling wallpaper, the dishes in the sink, the disassembled chain saw on the floor, and sighed heavily. "This place is so nice and neat it would be a crying shame to make a mess."

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"I don't know what you're talking about," said Morrill.

"I'm sure you don't," said Moodie, handcuffing him to the refrigerator door. Morrill started lunging, causing the door to swing open and a Pyrex bowl to flop out and discharge a yellowish substance, possibly dried-up custard, that rolled across the floor like a toy tire. Chief stared at it, fascinated. "I didn't know people kept plastic wood in their refrigerators. Well, what do we have here?" The custard or whatever it was had flopped down by a pair of work shoes at the foot of an easy chair. Moodie picked up the shoes. "Gorilla. I hope you have another pair of shoes, Mr. Morrill, because we'll be borrowing these."

It took less than two minutes to find the snuffboxes, which were in a cabinet under the sink. They opened more cabinets, pulled out drawers, emptied pants pockets, but had no luck finding the Zervos ruby. Then in the bedroom, Moodie, looking at the rumpled bed, said, "You know, the oldest, corniest place in the world to hide stuff is under a mattress, right? But look who we're dealing with, so here goes," and with his good arm he flipped up the mattress and there on the box spring, staring at them like a third eye, shone the Zervos ruby.

They went back into the kitchen where Chief showed their detainee the ring. "Look what I found."

Morrill lunged at the refrigerator door. "Someone planted that on me. I swear I ain't never seen it before."

"I'm sure you haven't," said Moodie.

Wayne felt sorry for Orestes Zervos as the two stood inside Junk & Disorderly, which Zervos hadn't reopened yet, and wasn't sure he ever would. Whitehaired and frail, he seemed devastated by his wife's death, but he was also grateful to the police for finding the murderer. He wanted to tear up the check Wayne had given Mrs. Zervos for the grandfather clock, but Wayne told him he couldn't accept gifts. He thanked the old man and shouldered the clock and started down the sidewalk to his pickup twenty feet away. It was midafternoon, under a blazing sun, and for once the wind wasn't blowing. His heart was heavy because he had decided to leave Flinns Lick. He liked the town with its wooded hills and green pastures and he liked the people, but he wanted normalcy, a place where he could fish without running into a sunken car and the guy next door didn't eliminate mice with a deer rifle. He would take the part-time job the Bennington P.D. had offered him and hope it would lead to a full-time position.

As he lugged his burden toward his pickup, the door to The

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Flood Zone swung open and Guy Blodgett stepped out, blinked in the sun, yawned, and started weaving up the sidewalk. Déjà vu all over again, thought Wayne, getting ready to zig when Blodgett zagged, but Blodgett fooled him and zigged when he should have zagged, running smack into Wayne and knocking the clock off his shoulder onto the sidewalk.

Looking at his grandfather clock with its broken glass and maple tree finial, Wayne wanted to cry; then he wanted to strangle the clumsy drunk, who was lying sprawled in the gutter. "Why don't you look where you going," he cried.

Blodgett raised his head dazedly and growled back, "Why can't you wear a watch like everyone else?"

There was one good thing about running into Blodgett: it made it easier to leave Flinns Lick. The clock was fixable but it was definitely time to move on. Trying not to think about the people he would miss, he wrote out his resignation.

Before giving Chief the letter, he wanted to say goodbye to Crystal. He'd just driven by Simmons Field and saw that the Hush Puppies were playing a game, so Crystal's grumpy mother wouldn't be home. But maybe Crystal wouldn't be home either, if she watched her mother's games. He could go to Simmons Field, see if she was in evidence, but first he would try her house. It was a bright but windy day—What else is new? he thought—as he jumped out of his truck on Hunter Street and rang the bell. Crystal opened the door, her young face exploding into a smile.

"Wayne!"

"Hi, young lady. Thought I'd stop by and say hello."

"Come on in." She led him into the kitchen and made him sit, gave him a Coke from the fridge, and shoved a plate of oatmeal-raisin cookies in front of him. "Mom must have known you were coming because she just baked them."

"Delicious," Wayne said, chewing. "Look, Crystal, I wanted to tell you that—"

"Guess what?"

He looked at the twelve year old's glowing face.

"Mom's outside in the garden, so you'll finally get to meet her."

"In the garden? I thought the Hush Puppies . . ." Wayne rose from his chair. "I've really got to be going."

"But you've never met my mom."

"Yes I have. In Bear's Mart. I think she was getting some Tums or Zantac."

"Tums or Zantac?" Crystal looked at him oddly, and then burst

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out laughing. "That's the *other* Vicki Miller in town. There're two of them, you know. The other one's a klutz, I can't stand her." She stared at Wayne with large eyes. "You thought that was my mom? My gosh, no, help." She went to the back door and shouted into the yard, "Mom, I want you to meet someone."

Wayne was brushing crumbs off his shirt when a slender woman in dirt-stained khakis, a blue kerchief wrapped around her head, entered the kitchen. There were dark circles under her eyes and worry lines on her forehead, but she was definitely no battleaxe. Her tired face wreathed into a welcoming smile as she undid the kerchief, light-colored hair falling onto her shoulders.

"So you're the famous Wayne Valley," she said, blushing and laughing at the same time. "I've heard so much about you from Crystal."

"Yes, ma'am. I mean . . ."

"You're not leaving, are you? Won't you sit down and have a cookie. I could use one myself. I'm famished."

"I suppose I could stay a little longer." Wayne sat down.

Outside their house two hours later, under a sugar maple whose branches jerked in the wind, Officer Valley reached through the driver's window of his pickup and took his letter of resignation off the dash. Holding it over the hood, he started to tear it up. Not a bright move. A gust of wind snatched two of the pieces.

Halfway down the block, Guy Blodgett was walking toward him, looking reasonably sober. A piece of the resignation letter sailed past him and dipped over a hedge onto someone's lawn. He came up to Wayne, preceded by his trademark ripe smell and shaking a bony finger.

"Gosh, I hate to see littering," said Guy. "Someone give you a parking ticket?"

"My letter of resignation. I'm staying."

"You are?" Blodgett's raddled face broke into a grin, and he opened wide his arms. Holding his breath and grimacing, Wayne felt the arms enclose him and the stubbled cheek grate against his own.

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BINGO

WILL LUDWIGSEN

It's disconcerting to come home from a long night working behind the bar at Chili's to find a hundred-pound German shepherd waiting for you.

Worse, a hundred-pound *narc* German shepherd.

"Dude," I said, backing away as the enormous dog bounded to greet me. "What the hell is that?"

"I know what you're thinking, Neil, and yes, it's a dog." Mac rose from his easy chair and held up his hands. "Listen to this. I got the coolest idea from the Discovery Channel." Mac, out of work, spent his days receiving the equivalent of a Ph.D. watching cable documentaries. He knew more about ocelot mating habits than any non-ocelot should know.

"On one of those forensics shows, they had these narc dogs the cops have at the airport sniffing out luggage and looking for coke. They walk around and sniff out dope a machine can't even find. They're like ninety-nine percent effective."

The dog knocked over our collection of foreign beer cans with a single swoosh of his tail at a hundred-percent effectiveness. They rattled to the floor and he backed away to evade responsibility.

"I thought it'd be cool to adopt a retired one, but the cops don't let people like you and me take home a police dog. You've got to be stable and responsible and all."

I didn't like where this was going.

"I pretty much gave up on it until this morning when—like some kind of omen—I get a call from Gina all crying and hysterical. She's leaving Brian and moving back in with my folks."

"Your sister's getting divorced? I'm sorry."

He waved it off. "Yeah, I'm sure she'll be fine. But here's the kicker: two months ago, she and Brian adopted—wait for it—a retired police dog! He doesn't want it, and Mom can't have dogs in the condo. So I said we'd take him."

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The dog burrowed his muzzle under a couch cushion, sniffing for contraband. He pulled away in revulsion after a few whiffs, which is what most of us would do.

I rubbed my temples and closed my eyes. "Do I even want to ask why you want a police dog?"

He grinned. "It's a stroke of genius. Ever since Julian got busted we've been out a supplier for good weed, right? And we know people living in this building have a taste for the occasional toke, right? I mean, we're across the street from the English department building. Every one of them has a stash: All we do is get this dog to find it for us. We send him out sniffing, and liberate what he finds."

"You mean steal it?"

The shepherd trundled over to Mac and rubbed against his leg.

"Is anyone going to tell the cops that someone stole their weed?" He patted the dog with increasing strength. The dog didn't notice until Mac all but pounded him on the back like a lost relative at a wedding. "This hound is our source. We don't need to buy stash ever again!"

"How are we going to get what the dog finds?"

"The Key."

Mac could have been an engineer if he'd ever mustered the strength to lift the cover of a book. He spent his lazy weekday afternoons tinkering with things until he got bored with them. That's why our television, stereo, refrigerator, and other appliances barely worked.

One project Mac did complete was to fashion a master key for the building. We crashed a party at the upstairs apartment of this aerobics instructor Mac hoped to ask out for a date. Once everyone got drunk (but not drunk enough to go out with Mac, alas), he fetched a few keys from the coats hanging in the hallway and laid them out on the kitchen table. He compared them for common features and made a master in the machine shop where he worked that week.

As scary as it sounds to hear that a disaffected twenty-year-old pot fiend had access to every apartment in the building, it wasn't bad. Mac was too lazy to steal anything big, and the worst you'd discover would be some coins missing from the laundry kitty or a pillow out of place.

"There are some flaws to your plan, Mac."

"How you figure?"

"Even if the dog will find the goods, you have no idea what kind they'll be. Dogs don't specialize in marijuana. He'll bring a plastic

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baggie full of crack rocks with a dealer toting his nine millimeter close behind. Then what do you do?"

"Easy. Trade in with someone."

"And get shot for your trouble? Or arrested? There's another eight months on the lease of this hellhole, and you can't pay your share from the county lockup." The dog clamped his teeth around my shoe. I tugged, but he growled and held his grip. I jerked my foot away and he skulked into the kitchen. "Besides, what happens when you get the marijuana home and he keeps digging through your stuff to get it again and again?"

"Man, what is it with you? Always going on about how something can't be done. You ever try to see if something can?"

The animal in question pawed through some dirty laundry and fashioned a lair in the corner of what would be the dining room if we ever dined around a table with napkins and utensils.

I sighed. "What's his name?"

"Gina called him Bingo but that's stupid. I'm going to call him Mellow."

The dog and I exchanged a look and agreed I'd continue to call him Bingo. I sighed. "Well, Bingo, let's get this over with. Come on."

He trotted toward me.

"What are you doing?" Mac blocked the door.

"I'm going to take him to find your drugs."

"Don't be stupid, man. The neighbors would see right through that. We can't send him out for at least a couple of weeks, long enough for them to think he's just a normal dog. Besides, they're all home now."

Bingo rubbed his back along the dining room wall and left a streak of dirt.

A couple of weeks?

"He can't live here! He's supposed to be out baying across the British moors, not drinking out of our toilet and sleeping on a bunch of old newspapers. I'm taking him to the pound first thing in the morning."

His eyes widened. "They'll put him to sleep."

"Okay, then I'll drop him off at PetsMart. They have people out front adopting animals on the weekends. I'll just make a deposit instead of a withdrawal."

Mac folded his arms. "Dude, when did you get to be so narrow minded?"

"Right around the time I got within a few credits of graduating and getting the hell out of here. When I'm gone, you can have

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Bingo stay with you then. I'm sure he can contribute more to the rent than you do."

I stalked past them both to my bedroom and slammed the door behind me.

It must have been the rhythmic thump of Bingo's hind leg scratching behind his ear that brought Old Man Carroway pounding on our door.

Our downstairs neighbor had retired from some miserable city government office where he denied license, tag, and marriage applications for thirty years. Old habits were hard to break; he was the kind of old man who tells you to quiet down during a good party or yells at kids playing in the street on Christmas morning.

Between episodes of *M*A*S*H*, he liked to jab a broom handle at his ceiling to tell us to "knock off the damned noise," even though we could never quite identify what he was talking about.

"He's going to turn us in!" Mac bolted from the couch. "Help me get Mellow into the bathroom."

I set down my calculus book and notepad. "Come on, dog!" I slapped my hand against my thigh and Bingo scuttled over. We shoved him into the bathroom and he leaped into the tub.

"Here's hoping Carroway doesn't have to take a leak."

"Who is it?" I shouted over the banging.

"You know damned well who it is. Carroway. From downstairs."

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, pulling the door open. "I didn't hear you."

Carroway thrust his jowly gray-stubbled face into the apartment and looked around. "What is that scratching noise?"

"Scratching?"

"Right over our bedroom. I keep hearing these snuffling and sucking and scratching noises."

Mac clenched his teeth so he wouldn't laugh.

Carroway shoved past me and into our dining room. He pointed to Bingo's corner. "Something's been digging down toward my apartment."

We leaned over the scratches on the floorboards. Mac stroked his chin for the best appearance of pensive consideration. "Rats?"

"Not in this building, mister. They set traps just two months ago."

"Maybe they're trying to get out."

Carroway put his hands on his hips. "Are we playing games here?"

Mac and I looked at each other. "No sir."

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"I'm not here to play games. I fought in two wars, for Christ's sake. Now where is the dog?"

"What dog?"

"Or cat or ferret or whatever the hell you kids keep in here. Where is it?"

"We don't have any pets, sir."

"They're not allowed above the first floor, you know."

"That's why we don't have one." Mac smiled. "And how are Mrs. Carroway's poodles?"

The man turned to stone before us. His jaw tightened, his fists clenched, his gaze locked on Mac like the tail gunner on a World War II bomber.

Slowly, he said, "Mrs. Carroway and her poodles have been out of town for the last few days."

So that was it. The brake on Carroway's downhill ride into total misanthropy had been released. She had probably been on the brink of suicide after fifty-odd years of living with a man who thought the Salvation Army should have an assassination squad.

He must have been lonely down there, eating Beefaroni from the can and shouting at *The Capitol Gang*. We were his only companions, banging around upstairs like the children he'd never had. Would it hurt to be friendlier to him? To invite him over for coffee? I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off.

"I'll tell you this, wise guy: we can play games if that's what you want, but you need to know I always win. I'm watching you, and as soon as I see one residence agreement violation, I'm turning you in."

"We just have a few months left in the semester. We can—"

He scowled. "One more violation. One oversized package left in the mailroom. One loud party. One extra car taking up a space not assigned to you." He nodded. "One pet scratching its way into my apartment."

"Yes sir," I said.

"Out on the street, the both of you."

"Yes sir," Mac said.

Carroway stepped back into the hall but stopped and turned. "I've seen thirty years of college kids come and go from this building. I've outlasted them all. I'll outlast you, too."

Even through the passenger window encrusted with dog snot, I could see there wasn't anybody offering dogs for adoption outside of PetsMart the next morning.

"Stay here, dog." I cracked open the window for him and locked the doors before I went inside.

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A teenager in the fish department was the only available employee, and he wasn't too helpful.

"Adoptions?" he asked, dipping a net into the neons.

"Yeah. Those people you have out front on the weekends, taking applications for dogs and cats."

"Oh! The ASPCA volunteers."

"Yes." Progress. "When are they coming back?"

"The last Sunday of every month. Why? You need a dog?"

"Good God, no. I need to give one back."

The kid frowned and descended the stepstool. "They don't take returns."

"He's not a return. He's not defective. He's just not . . . appropriate."

"Well, you can check the bulletin board for a no-kill shelter, but it isn't cool to abandon a dog."

"I'm not abandoning the dog. I'm trying to find him a better home. Listen—"

A middle-aged lady tugged on the kid's sleeve. "Excuse me, young man."

"Ma'am?"

I had become invisible.

"I thought I should tell someone. I saw a big German shepherd eating the headrest in a Tercel parked out front. You might want to get on the loudspeaker and warn the owner."

"I'm the owner, lady," I said. "It's my Tercel."

"Your dog looked hungry. Are you here for some chow?"

How do you tell someone you're trying to foist off a dog on PetsMart?

"Among other things."

"A new dog owner, then!" The lady strode toward me. "How very lucky for you both! You'll need to buy him a dog basket. He needs a place to sleep that's all his own."

Our whole apartment was a giant dog basket, but I picked one out to humor her.

"You'll need a bigger basket. Don't forget some rawhide bones, too." She handed me a huge white bone from the shin of a tyrannosaurus.

"Before I got Echo, my only friends were on *ER*. Now that we walk in the park, everything's different. You've got to make your dog happy so he can do the same for you."

My dog was happy tackling dope dealers and tearing plastic bags of cocaine into a powdery explosion at the airport baggage terminal. I doubted he'd be content chasing birds around the greenway.

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"And never buy your dog food from any place other than a pet store. They just sell bags of ash and dung at supermarkets and call it dog chow. It's horrible. Here." She pointed to the most expensive sack on the bottom shelf, fifty pounds of kibble so pricey it might as well have been diamonds.

I hefted the bag into my cart and tried to calculate the available balance on my MasterCard.

"It takes someone special to love a dog, someone with a parental instinct and a big heart. I can tell you've got those."

I was beginning to realize Bingo wasn't just a wall decoration or a new video game. Mac might as well have adopted a child. Bingo's saving grace was that we wouldn't have to buy him a car when he turned sixteen.

"Well, ma'am, thank you for your help. I think this will get us started."

"I hope you have good running shoes. You'll need some traction to stop him."

I smiled and steered my cart to the registers. Fear gripped me: was I ready to own a dog? Or was he ready to own me?

It's just for a month, I said to myself. Then the dog goes to the ASPCA and everything goes back to normal.

When I returned to the car carrying Bingo's temporary possessions, he had already clawed through the seat for a greasy hamburger wrapper (courtesy of Mac, no doubt) and curled up in the back seat to sleep it off.

I dumped the sacks of food in the trunk and slammed it closed. He looked up at me and then settled his head on his paw.

"Don't get too comfortable, pal." Parental instinct or not, the last thing I needed was a son who licked his own testicles.

Bingo turned out to be a better roommate than Mac. He left me alone when I was studying. He put the toilet seat back down after he finished drinking. He never asked to borrow my money or car keys or my Moby CDs. He had cleaner feet and fresher breath, too.

I'm not sure we were good roommates for him in return. I was often out at my summer semester class or work. I frequently found myself worrying about Bingo. Had anyone fed him, or was he licking Doritos dust from Mac's fingers while he slept? Was he trying to hold his urine because no one would walk him? Was he lonely, staring out smudged windows at passersby?

One morning on my way out the door, I almost stepped in a paper plate of mustard. Clutching my uniform shirt, I went to the

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back bedroom and kicked Mac's food-stained mattress until he opened his eyes and groaned.

"Hey, man, you can't just feed the dog mustard all the time."

"Mustard?" Mac rubbed his eyes.

"He's a carnivore! You can't feed a hundred-pound dog condiments."

"He's eaten just about everything else. He's a garbage compactor. The only way we'd get a return on our investment now is if he could detect booze and chicks, too."

Mac's plan to wait awhile and let the dog blend in notwithstanding, there was little hope for anyone thinking Bingo was a "normal dog."

Some poor girl got the shock of her life when Bingo tried to scurry past her onto the second floor. I grabbed him before he made much progress; Carroway lived down there, and the last thing I wanted was an encounter between them. I'm not sure what she had to hide, but she ran trembling past us down the emergency stairwell I used to smuggle Bingo downstairs.

The garbage men didn't like us, either. Bingo seemed fascinated with the row of trash cans behind the building, and barked insanely at the men as they dumped them into the truck when I walked him on Thursday mornings. I shuddered to think of all the packets and bottles and syringes rattling around inside there from our drug-addled neighbors. I'd steer him back toward Franklin Street, out of sight of Carroway's window, before he could make too much noise.

The men tossed the cans back into the alley and clambered back aboard the truck in a hurry to get away. The driver always clenched his hands around the wheel, and once even gathered the courage to shout as he drove on to the next block, "Get that dog out in the country! He doesn't belong in an apartment!"

Bingo growled as the truck rolled by, and I wondered if those guys were above picking through the trash for my neighbor's "leftovers."

"Sorry, sir!" I yelled after him. "He's harmless." To people who have nothing to hide, I thought. Maybe there were fewer people like that than I knew.

It's funny how your habits change. I used to enjoy just coming home and watching television, but the more Bingo and I walked together outside, the more I enjoyed it. It was nice to listen to your own thoughts and follow Bingo while he explored the streets.

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We were out exploring one evening when a gang of tricyclists rounded the corner, red safety flags waving.

The older people in our neighborhood enjoy patrolling the streets on huge tricycles. With their sweaters and baseball caps, they look like benevolent street hoods, not boosting cars but picking up bottles like some sort of Heck's Angels.

I wasn't paying attention while reaching into the mailbox for a student loan check and holding Bingo's leash between two fingers.

That's how he snapped away from me.

"Bingo!" I screamed after him as he scampered down the street, barking away.

They almost escaped. The man on the lead tricycle caught a glimpse of the demon beast pursuing him to the gates of hell and waved the others on. Pumping their feet like runaway steam engines, they steered the trikes in different directions.

Bingo bore down on the closest just as she veered toward a mound of garbage bags. One caught on the right pedal and ripped open. Bingo leaped over the clattering cans and into the tricycle's rear cargo basket.

The woman screamed.

I wasn't far behind Bingo, so I managed to pull him away before he could clamp his jaws down on her neck and worry her like an old sock.

I recognized the trademark knit sweater and shouted, "Everything's okay, Mrs. Carroway! No need to panic!"

The woman turned, her eyes bulging from her skull as Bingo's teeth clicked together hollowly. It wasn't Mrs. Carroway. The sweater looked like hers, but then many older women wear similar clothes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, ma'am. I thought Mrs. Carroway had . . ."

The man in the lead pedaled toward the scene, and I recognized the scowl immediately. Bingo squirmed and I was tempted to let him go, but the old coot would sue if he survived.

"So this must be the rat scratching his way to my apartment," said Carroway.

He had me, but maybe there was some mercy in his heart. "I know we're not supposed to have dogs in the building, but Bingo here lost his owners and we had to take him in. He'll be out of here in a week or so, I promise."

A smile peeled away from Carroway's grayed teeth. "He will indeed, young man. And you with him."

"That's not necessary, is it?"

Carroway turned to his tricycle harem. "We think it is. We're

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filing a petition for your eviction first thing in the morning."

"Tomorrow's the Fourth of July."

"Then first thing Monday morning. I guess you have two extra days to choose a bridge overpass for your new home."

Carroway and his entourage pedaled away toward the duck pond. He looked over his shoulder to glower at us just as they crested the hill.

I stooped and scratched Bingo behind the ears.

"Boy, you can't just chase everybody to ground. They're not all drug runners and street hoods." I considered. "Just Mac."

The dog leaned against me, knocking me off balance to the ground. He pressed his head near my face and I patted him.

"You've got to steer clear of some people."

Two weeks ago, the easiest excuse to get rid of Bingo would be for the landlord to have him taken away. That would solve the problem of an enormous dog tearing through our home and eating our scraps and knocking over our garbage.

Now I wasn't sure Bingo was the one I wanted taken away.

I explained the situation to Mac when I got home.

"We've got to do something. Bingo almost ate an old woman today."

He thought about it. "Maybe she's using weed for glaucoma."

"I've got to ask you, Mac, did Gina tell you what kind of police dog this was?"

"What am I, a dogologist?"

"Maybe he's not a drug dog. Maybe he's meant to be chasing down criminals and we're not giving him enough to do."

"Yeah, like in all those cop movies where the cop retires and then has to take one last case because he doesn't know what to do with his life anymore?"

I sighed. "Yeah, just like that. We've got to do something with him. He's bored out of his mind."

"I'll tell you what it is." Mac pointed toward Bingo's nest of torn socks and towels. "The dog's gone crazy. His partner was shot in a gun battle with Colombian drug lords and Bingo watched him die flailing in his own blood. That kind of thing warps a dog, especially a goody-four-paws like Bingo here. He wants revenge. He's just waiting for an opportunity."

"You're an idiot," I said.

"Maybe they had to retire him." Mac's tone was ominous. "He jumps up one of those package ramps, finds a suitcase, rips it open. Turns out it's full of LSD. The dog licks away like crazy and

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starts tripping out, barking at imaginary fairies, taking nips at the cops because now they look like monsters. They say you never get over an acid trip. Maybe the dog's lost his mind."

Bingo looked up at me and all but rolled his eyes.

"The dog has lost his mind? The dog?" My voice cracked. "You brought him to live here in this tiny filthy apartment to score free pot. You feed him scraps, yell at him, and think he's the one who lost his mind?" I ran my shaking hand through my hair. "Mac, I'd be digging through your stuff, too, just to clean it."

"What's up with you and him, anyway?"

"Nothing. We just bonded because we're the only civilized creatures in this apartment."

"You've sure taken a shine to him—always going out, running around the block and all. You were the one who wanted to get rid of him, remember?"

"And you were the one who got him in the first place."

"Relax, man." He pressed the channel button on the remote and changed to *Junkyard Wars*. "I'm just saying."

"Just saying what?"

"Forget it, Neil. Never mind."

"No, tell me."

"You're all wound up. Responsible. Ever since we got this dog and you've been taking care of him, you're an adult. You used to be cool, dude. Good for a drink or a smoke or whatever."

"I'm still cool."

"Okay. If you say so." Mac changed the channel again.

"I am." At least Bingo thought so.

"Sure. Of course." Mac changed the channel again. "Look, if you think he's bored, we can just put him to work this weekend. Everybody's going to be away with their folks or at the fireworks, so this is as good a time as any. We'll take him around, get the stuff, and then you can take him to the pound or whatever."

Maybe there were worse things than eviction—things like living with a roommate who always paid the rent late and didn't take out the trash. I'd gotten older and Mac hadn't; maybe I was aging in dog years with Bingo.

But Bingo was no longer the one I wanted to take to the pound. I couldn't afford this apartment by myself, but there were others in the city, big studios with room to run around and maybe a yard downstairs where you could dig.

Might as well put that pet deposit I'd saved to good use.

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The next evening when everyone was away for the weekend or watching fireworks, we began our search.

Or tried to: Bingo just sat beside Mac, panting.

"Go on, boy!" I said.

He didn't do anything.

"Maybe there's a command." Mac squatted beside him. "Get drugs!"

No reaction.

"Go pot! Find stash! Get the goods! Gimme the stuff!"

Bingo scratched his ear.

"He's a government dog," said Mac, hitting himself on the forehead with his palm. "Procure illegal substances!"

Bingo looked at us with an expression two or three IQ points below disdain.

I patted my thighs and at least got him to stand up. When I said, "Come on, boy!" and stepped into the hall, he bounded after me.

"We have to go with him."

We led Bingo upstairs from floor to floor. Bingo lifted his head high, turning it from side to side like a weather vane, sniffing in all directions. Once we reached the top floor, he turned around and descended again.

"That's it?" Mac shook his head. "That can't be. I know for a fact these girls have at least a few rolled cigarettes. Bad Bingo! Bad dog!" Mac pointed. "Check again!"

I grabbed Mac's arm while Bingo skulked further downstairs. "If the dog says there isn't anything up here, there isn't anything up here."

"I think the dog is just some kind of idiot or something."

"Funny, he said the same thing about you."

Mac was about to reply when Bingo's constant barking echoed from the second floor.

"He found something!" Mac slapped me on the shoulder. "I knew he could do it."

We found Bingo growling at an all-too-familiar door.

"Old man Carroway's on the stuff? Dude! Maybe he's lighting up to calm down after being a bastard all day."

Bingo pawed against the door, bulging it inward.

"That can't be," I said. "Maybe it's just prescription medicines."

"I don't think Bingo would react like this for a bunch of old bottles of Lasix."

Mac was right. Bingo, frantic now, tried to burrow underneath.

Mac leaned over and inserted his key.

"Ready?"

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I checked my watch. Carroway was probably still on his evening tricycle patrol, so I nodded.

Mac swung the door open. Bingo launched through like a missile and ran for the back of the apartment.

We looked around as he sniffed the baseboards. Carroway kept the house as we expected he would: stacks of old Limbaugh Letters on the coffee table, plastic coverings on the couch and chairs, bundles of mail on a tidy desk. The room reeked of sweet perfume, covering the stench of old TV dinner boxes and hair tonic.

Mrs. Carroway's decorative taste ranged from bright orange floral to bright yellow floral with some splashes of purple floral in between. A tray of old rings and bracelets Zsa Zsa Gabor would consider too tacky rested on the kitchen table, perhaps on their way to the pawn shop.

Mac shook his head. "Some people have no taste."

I was about to mention his milk crate bookcases when Bingo ran into the bedroom. He tore the sheets and pillows into an exploding spray of feathers and foam.

"Man, he's going to town. Good boy, Bingo!"

Bingo was just about to tear the mattress off the bed when the front door slammed against the wall and Carroway burst inside.

"What is going on here?"

I ran into the bedroom to grab Bingo while Mac turned toward Carroway. "Uh, hello, sir."

"What are you doing in my apartment?" He looked past Mac to check what I was doing.

Mac glanced down. "Nothing, sir. The door was standing open and I'm afraid the dog got loose and ran inside. We got here just in time."

"Just in time for what?"

I pulled Bingo into the living room by the collar as he wriggled to break free.

Mac swallowed. "Just in time for us to lock the door for you before someone broke in."

"It seems someone already has." He craned his neck toward the bedroom. Then, grinning, he picked up his phone and dialed. "Looks like you'll be out of here before Monday after all."

I reached toward him. "Mister Carroway—"

He turned his back to me and spoke into the phone. I couldn't make out the words, but it wasn't hard to figure out who he was calling.

I traded glances with Mac. Some visceral, animal instinct encouraged me to run, to jump into the car and get out of town.

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That's what Mac would do, hit the road like a character in a Steinbeck novel. I wouldn't be as lucky. They'd kick me out of school and find me wherever I went.

Carroway hung up and folded his arms. "They're on their way."

"You don't have to press charges, you know," said Mac, the amateur attorney. "You can just sign a complaint and it doesn't go on anybody's record. No harm, no foul, right? We weren't stealing anything."

Carroway shook his head. "How do I know that?"

There are few half hours more awkward than standing in someone's apartment waiting for the police to come and haul you away. Mac or I would sometimes try to appeal to his human kindness, but Carroway had long ago purged that from his soul.

"Can we at least go back to our own place?" Mac tried to get us out of the room, at least.

"So you can make a break for it? I don't think so."

"You know where to find us. Can we at least take the dog upstairs?"

Carroway glowered at Bingo. "No, he's staying right here with us."

When the uniformed man arrived, Mac and I were surprised to see he wasn't a police officer.

"I'm from County Animal Control," he said. "We've had reports of a dangerous dog."

Animal control? Why hadn't Carroway called the police? Why take Bingo away when we were the ones who had broken in?

Bingo stood behind me, and the officer unfolded a leash.

"Wait! We'll leave right now. I'll take the dog with me, and we'll just get out."

"Sorry, son." He clasped the leash to Bingo's collar. "Pending an investigation, the animal has to be taken to the county shelter."

Bingo settled to the floor like a sixties protester, sooner dragged from the scene than leave under his own power. The officer was willing to oblige. He curled his fingers under the collar and tugged Bingo toward the stairs. The dog let out a single yelp and writhed against his grip.

"At least let me take him down. You're hurting him."

Mac and I followed the officer down the steps as Carroway lagged behind. My voice echoed through the building and people opened their doors to look.

"I do this every day, kid," he replied.

We emerged at the ground floor and the officer backed through the steel door, Bingo squirming in his grasp.

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We scuttled through the parking lot toward the county truck, and I couldn't let it go any further. I grabbed for my dog's collar myself, peeling away the officer's fingers. He fought me back, and as we wrestled, Bingo backed through the collar and set himself free.

He ran toward the line of garbage cans, barking hysterically. Carroway made a halfhearted attempt to chase him, but Bingo knocked one over before he could stop him. Kicking up a spray of papers and boxes, Bingo seemed jubilant and in his element, like an artist fulfilling his vision after long years of practice. He yanked at something, wrested it free, and bounded back to me with the goods clamped in his mouth.

Bingo dropped the gray-green severed hand at my feet, orange and purple costume rings still on the fingers. I patted him on the head. He'd trained me well.

The fascination with digging toward Carroway's apartment. The interest in the trash cans and the second floor. The attraction to Mrs. Carroway's sweater. Bingo knew what Carroway was all along. And now I knew what Bingo was.

A cadaver dog.

Mac whirled away, stooping to the ground and gagging. The animal control officer blanched, clutching at his walkie-talkie.

Carroway's eyes frosted and his lips tightened to a slit. He stepped backwards from the scene as our neighbors leaned from their windows and dialed the police on cordless phones.

Bingo growled by my side.

"I wouldn't go any farther if I were you, Mister Carroway." I felt like Clint Eastwood, pointing a German shepherd instead of a .357 Magnum. "This dog has tackled quicker men than you in his day."

Carroway didn't play along by pulling a gun or vowing revenge. He just settled against a car and slid to the ground while we waited for the police.

You'd think catching a murderer in your apartment building would win you some special treatment: a break on the rent, at least, or a waived pet deposit.

We were still evicted, although the manager decided to terminate our lease with no strings attached. I guess he was worried about what else Bingo would find in that dump.

I hear Mac moved in with a fraternity. He's serving as technical advisor to schemes and stunts that make the student newspaper interesting reading again.

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Bingo and I testified only briefly at Carroway's trial. Other witnesses and investigators offered more ghoulish details: Mrs. Carroway's severed parts had been distributed among the weekly trash pick-ups, and the sweater she had worn when she died was a gift to a new girlfriend, one with a better personality for Carroway's taste but not quite the right look.

Given the physical evidence, it didn't take the jury long to deliberate, and as Carroway was taken to begin his sentence, I resisted the temptation to tell him his new neighbors would be much worse than we were.

Bingo seems happily retired now. Maybe that last case got the fever for law enforcement out of his system. Still, when we're walking around our new apartment complex and he starts digging in the bushes, I just pull him away and pretend I didn't see anything.

Solution to the April "UNSOLVED"

Freddy Hawkes is the safecracker fleeing in the Bugatti.

HUSBAND	WIFE	LAST NAME	CAR	STATE
Alfred	Flora	Kilmer	Excelsior	Va.
Bertie	Alice	Irwin	Citroën	S. C.
Cedric	Doris	Garcy	Apperson	Wyo.
David	Betty	Levine	Daimler	Tenn.
Edward	Celia	Jarvis	Ferrari	Utah
Freddy	Ellen	Hawkes	Bugatti	Texas

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THE GOOD KID

BRIAN RICHMOND

His lungs aching, his heart pounding, Marty crashed through the doorway of a ratty-looking record shop. His buddies were dead or cuffed outside and the cops had the street closed off. Marty turned the sign hanging on the door to CLOSED, knowing as he did so that it was stupid. Like the cops were going to say, oh look, a CLOSED sign, we can't go in.

There was one guy behind the counter in the shop. Twenty-something, baggy clothes, one of those sixties-style haircuts that were back in fashion.

"The bank, huh?" the kid said.

Marty pointed the Colt at him.

"Good idea," the kid said. "Shoot me. Make a big noise. With the cops outside looking for you."

"Back door . . . ?" Marty was breathless, running was not his thing. He lowered the gun. Damn thing felt heavy.

"Sure, like they haven't thought of that."

Christ, the kid was right. He was screwed and this guy knew it. Here he was, thirty years at this business off and on and Slim Shady here was telling him the way things were.

"That the cash?" Marty had actually forgotten he was carrying the sack. He brought the gun up again. This guy was just too cool.

"For crissake, stop wavin' the goddamn gun around, okay? Jesus." He walked past Marty, peeked out into the street. "They're starting to search the shops both ends of the street. Working their way down. They know you're still around. At large . . ." He laughed at the sound of the jargon.

"Christ, I may just shoot you anyway, only thing'll shut you up."

"Hey, why do that when you can get away with half the money?"

Half the money. There it was. Okay. Good. Now Marty felt a bit more at home. Now they were talking business.

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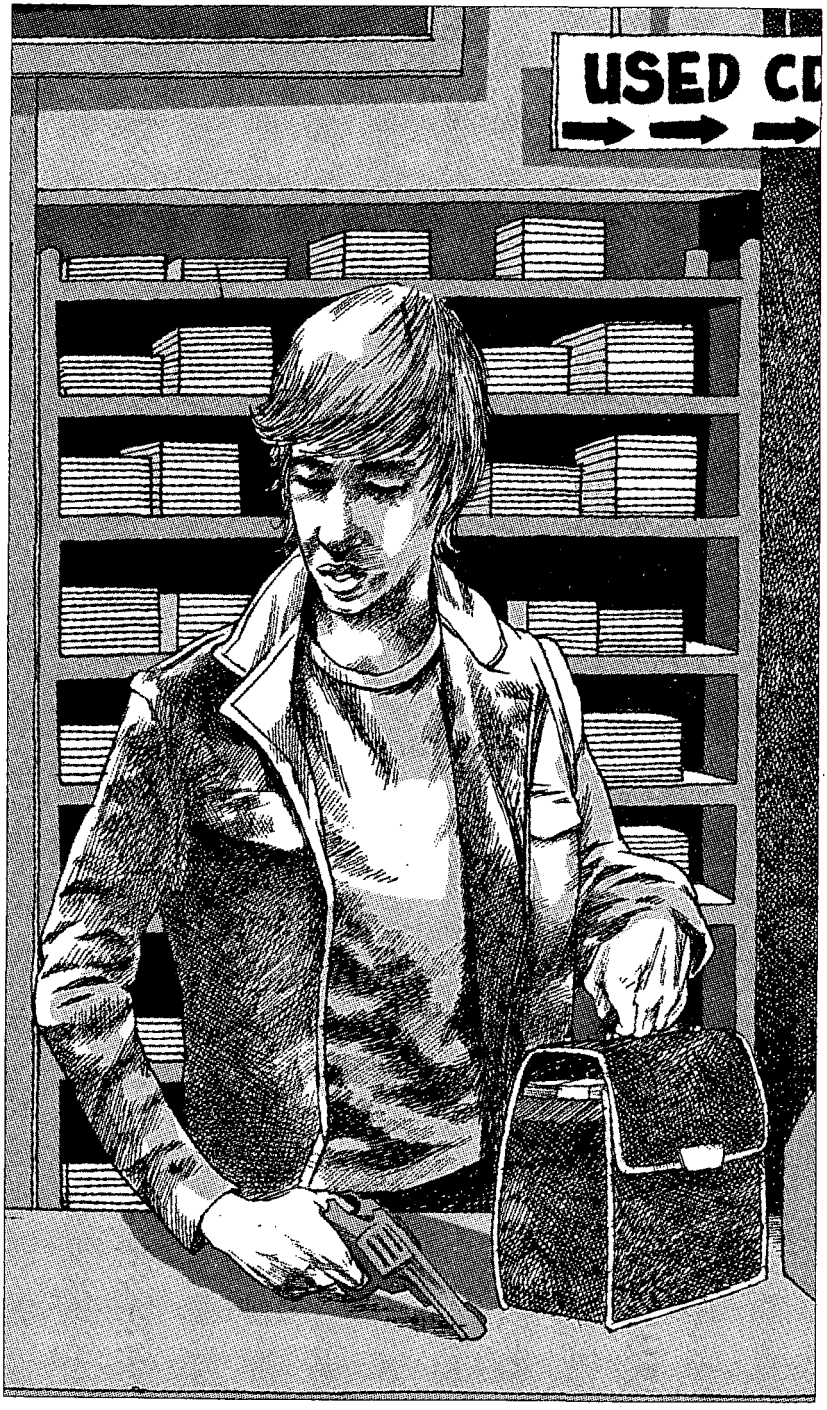

M. K. Perker

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"How 'bout I just put a gun to your head, take you hostage?"

"Oh, yeah, like in the movies. Look, you know that's crap. When did you ever hear of that working? Think about it. I'm your dream come true. Crooked. Greedy. Willing to lie just to get the green. We can work something out here."

"You're pretty cool about this. For a civilian."

"Hey, I've been in trouble off and on since I was twelve. I've been inside. And anyway, so far, I haven't done a thing wrong. This is a win-win situation for me."

"So, Mr. Win-Win, what's the master plan?"

"Let me think, will ya? You're a customer . . . Naw, that's not it . . . You're a rep. That's it! You're a rep from one of the CD retailers. Hell, we've known each other for years. We were in here, shootin' the breeze, heard the commotion . . . What's happening, Officer, is everyone all right? Yeah, that's it. A rep."

"That's the brilliant plan?"

"It is a brilliant plan. I own this shop. I've known you for years. Who's gonna doubt me?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Look, they're just breezin' through all the businesses here, looking for something suspicious. Why should anybody think you're not who I say you are?" He paused. "Unless . . ."

"What?"

"The money. The gun. You've got to give them to me."

"No way."

" 'Kay. Fine. You're on your own."

"Look, your plan's as good as you say, they won't even look at me."

"They might, and if they do . . . Plus, cops come in here, you're standing there tooled up and carrying all that cash, you'll be nervous. Uptight. Cops smell that stuff. You know they do."

"Why should I trust you?"

"You don't. I take the gun and the money, I stick them in the safe. Soon as the cops are gone, you get the gun and half the money."

"How do I know you'll give it back?"

" 'Cause I say I will. And how do I know you'll give me my cut? What? You're worried about takin' me in a fight if it comes to that, huh? You scared of me? Look, you think I wanna slug it out with you, make a lot of noise, drop both of us in it? Still, it's your call. But, I'm not kiddin', you're still carrying when they come in here, you're on your own. We're runnin' outa time."

He was right. It was decision time. Marty didn't like it. He didn't

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like it one bit. He took out the automatic, ejected the round in the chamber. Removing the magazine, he handed the unloaded weapon to the kid, along with the money. The kid didn't really believe Marty would hand him the loaded gun, did he?

The kid smiled. "Fair enough. I'll put these in back. Also, I've got a briefcase in there and a business card from one of the sales guys who calls here from time to time. You can show it to the cops if they ask. Just remember the name, though."

The kid took the money and the gun and went out through a door behind the counter.

The cops were working their way down the street, time was running out, and he didn't know what else to do. Mr. Cool rummaged around in back. Marty heard the safe being opened, a pause, then it closing again, the spin of the tumblers. When the kid came back in he was carrying a little nickel-plated .22 in his hand.

"Surprise." The gun made a pathetic little crack but Marty felt his leg go numb and he dropped straight to the ground, like a jacket sliding off a hanger. He sat up, looked down, and saw a pool of blood begin to well out from his left thigh. It didn't hurt, but it was still numb from the impact. The kid kept the gun on him.

"I knew it," Marty said, "I knew you were working some move, you little . . ."

"The only move I'm working is getting you out of here. Jesus, did you really think the cops were just going to take you at your word? That a business card would satisfy them?" He threw a white card onto Marty's lap. It said: Dave Cash, Impact Recordings.

"Remember that name. And keep your goddamn wits about you, you could still get outa this mess."

The kid stood for a moment beside the door to the street, took a deep breath. His face became anxious, fearful. He opened the door and started shouting: "Help! Please! My friend's been shot! Officers!"

Christ, Marty had to admit, the kid was good. The way he put his hands to the side of his head, he looked really shook up . . . Marty knew he better get in character too.

A couple of cops burst in, guns drawn. They looked down at Marty, who was now lying back on the floor, moaning, blood pooling beneath him.

"Get an ambulance!" one shouted to the other. "What happened here?"

The kid looked really shaken. "This guy burst in here, just after I heard the sirens. He . . . he shot Dave here. Then he told us if we didn't give him some time to get away before we called you guys,

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he'd get some of his buddies to come for us later on. I was too scared to get help, but Dave was getting worse."

"It's okay, it's okay. My partner's gettin' an ambulance. Now where'd he go?"

The kid pointed: "Out back . . ." and the cop ran off.

Marty opened his eyes. "Did you really have to shoot me?"

Kneeling beside him, the kid whispered, "You're a shooting victim now. Nobody's gonna ask you any questions. They'll load you in an ambulance and take you to hospital. It's only a .22 round and it went straight through the flesh in your flabby old thigh there. Good thing you don't work out. You go to the hospital, get it bandaged, get a shot of pain relief, then you sneak outa there. Disappear."

"They're gonna know you lied if I take off."

"Guess you didn't read the sign."

Marty twisted his head to look at the shop window. The backwards letters said: CLOSING DOWN SALE—LAST DAY.

The kid smiled. "I'm finished in this town. I owe money to some pretty heavy people. By the time you're making your break from the hospital, I'll be gone. I'm taking all the money, of course."

"So, you shot me in the leg and now you're gonna rip me off?"

"Uh-huh."

Marty smiled. "Thanks, kid. You earned it."

The kid smiled back. "It is a brilliant plan." He slipped Marty the .22. "Keep this outa sight. Just in case."

Two paramedics burst into the shop. "We'll take it from here."

Marty groaned and closed his eyes as they lifted him onto the stretcher. Just before they took him out to the ambulance, he managed to look toward the kid, give a sly wink, then he was gone.

The kid went back behind the counter of the shop, sat down. He took a deep breath. The old guy was a pro. He knew that the cops would have seen through him without the shooting. And he was willing to give up the money for freedom if that was what it took.

From back of the shop, the cop came in.

"Gone."

"Officer," the kid said, "I lied to you."

"What!"

"That guy, the one in the ambulance . . . he's the one you want."

You could have driven a bus into the cop's open mouth.

"He busted in here. I've got a .22, it's legal—you know, for robberies. I shot him in the leg, but then he pointed this gun at me. Made me hand over mine. He gave me a bag and his own gun, told

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me to hide them in my safe, that some of his friends would come and get it later. That if I said anything . . . he still had my .22, had it pointed on me the whole time, that's why I was so scared . . ." He buried his head in his hands.

"The money's here?"

"In my safe . . ."

"Jesus." The cop got on his radio, reported that the guy in the ambulance was the guy they wanted, told them he was armed with a .22.

Then the kid led him into the back room, opened the safe, showed him the automatic and the bag of cash. Of course, the cop didn't know that the bag was lighter than when it came in through the door.

"Goddamn. Would you look at that."

"Officer, you won't let anything happen to me, will you?"

"Don't worry, you'll get protection. And there'll be a reward."

"A reward?" Yeah, like he didn't know.

"Big one. Apprehending an armed robber. Some bank staff were shot, they pay out big to get guys that do that. Plus, there'll be something for gettin' them their money back."

"A reward?" said the kid. "Imagine that. Imagine that . . ."

In the ambulance, Marty breathed in the air through the mask they gave him. The siren wailed as they cut through the traffic. Best getaway car Marty ever had.

Okay, he'd come out of it all empty handed, but he had to admit that, without the kid, he wouldn't have got out at all.

You had to admire someone as smooth as that, able to think on his feet.

Yeah, thought Marty, he was a good kid.

A good kid.

Marty heard more sirens, coming closer.

Hey, imagine that. A police escort.

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CHEATING THE GALLOWS

They say that a union of opposites makes the happiest marriage, and perhaps it is on the same principle that men who chum together are always so oddly assorted. You shall find a man of letters sharing diggings with an auctioneer, and a medical student pigging with a stockbroker's clerk. Perhaps each thus escapes the temptation to talk "shop" in his hours of leisure, while he supplements his own experiences of life by his companion's.

There could not be an odder couple than Tom Peters and Everard G. Roxdal—the contrast began with their names, and ran through the entire chapter. They had a bedroom and a sitting-room in common, but it would not be easy to find what else. To his landlady, worthy Mrs. Seacon, Tom Peters's profession was a little vague, but everybody knew that Roxdal was the manager of the City and Suburban Bank, and it puzzled her to think why a bank manager should live with such a seedy-looking person, who smoked clay pipes and sipped whisky and water all the evening when he was at home. For Roxdal was as spruce and erect as his fellow-lodger was round-shouldered and shabby; he never smoked, and he confined himself to a small glass of claret at dinner.

It is possible to live with a man and see very little of him. Where each of the partners lives his own life in his own way, with his own circle of friends and external amusements, days may go by without the men having five minutes together. Perhaps this explains why these partnerships jog along so much more peaceably than marriages, where the chain is drawn so much tighter, and galls the partners rather than links them. Diverse, however, as were the hours and habits of the chums, they often breakfasted together, and they agreed in one thing—they never stayed out at night. For the rest Peters sought his diversions in the company of journalists, and frequented debating rooms, where he propounded the most iconoclastic views; while Roxdal had highly

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respectable houses open to him in the suburbs, and was, in fact, engaged to be married to Clara Newell, the charming daughter of a retired corn merchant, a widower with no other child.

Clara naturally took up a good deal of Roxdal's time, and he often dressed to go to the play with her, while Peters stayed at home in a faded dressing-gown and loose slippers. Mrs. Seacon liked to see gentlemen about the house in evening dress, and made comparisons not favourable to Peters. And this in spite of the fact that he gave her infinitely less trouble than the younger man. It was Peters who first took the apartments, and it was characteristic of his easy-going temperament that he was so openly and naïvely delighted with the view of the Thames obtainable from the bedroom window, that Mrs. Seacon was emboldened to ask twenty-five per cent more than she had intended. She soon returned to her normal terms, however, when his friend Roxdal called the next day to inspect the rooms, and overwhelmed her with a demonstration of their numerous shortcomings. He pointed out that their being on the ground floor was not an advantage, but a disadvantage, since they were nearer the noises of the street—in fact, the house being a corner one, the noises of two streets. Roxdal continued to exhibit the same finicking temperament in the petty details of the ménage. His shirt fronts were never sufficiently starched, nor his boots sufficiently polished. Tom Peters, having no regard for rigid linen, was always good-tempered and satisfied, and never acquired the respect of his landlady. He wore blue check shirts and loose ties even on Sundays. It is true he did not go to church, but slept on till Roxdal returned from morning service, and even then it was difficult to get him out of bed, or to make him hurry up his toilette operations. Often the mid-day meal would be smoking on the table while Peters would smoke in the bed, and Roxdal, with his head thrust through the folding doors that separated the bedroom from the sitting-room, would be adjuring the sluggard to arise and shake off his slumbers, and threatening to sit down without him, lest the dinner be spoilt. In revenge, Tom was usually up first on weekdays, sometimes at such unearthly hours that Polly had not yet removed the boots from outside the bedroom door, and would bawl down to the kitchen for his shaving water. For Tom, lazy and indolent as he was, shaved with the unfailing regularity of a man to whom shaving has become an instinct. If he had not kept fairly regular hours, Mrs. Seacon would have set him down as an actor, so clean-shaven was he. Roxdal did not shave. He wore a full beard, and, being a fine figure of a man to boot, no uneasy investor could look upon him without being reassured as to the stability of the bank he

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managed so successfully. And thus the two men lived in an economical comradeship, all the firmer, perhaps, for their mutual incongruities.

It was on a Sunday afternoon in the middle of October, ten days after Roxdal had settled in his new rooms, that Clara Newell paid her first visit to him there. She enjoyed a good deal of liberty, and did not mind accepting his invitation to tea. The corn merchant, himself indifferently educated, had an exaggerated sense of the value of culture, and so Clara, who had artistic tastes without much actual talent, had gone in for painting, and might be seen, in pretty toilettes, copying pictures in the Museum. At one time it looked as if she might be reduced to working seriously at her art, for Satan, who finds mischief still for idle hands to do, had persuaded her father to embark the fruits of years of toil in bubble companies. However, things turned out not so bad as they might have been, a little was saved from the wreck, and the appearance of a suitor, in the person of Everard G. Roxdal, ensured her a future of competence, if not of the luxury she had been entitled to expect. She had a good deal of affection for Everard, who was unmistakably a clever man, as well as a good-looking one. The prospect seemed fair and cloudless. Nothing presaged the terrible storm that was about to break over these two lives. Nothing had ever for a moment come to vex their mutual contentment, till this Sunday afternoon. The October sky, blue and sunny, with an Indian summer sultriness, seemed an exact image of her life, with its aftermath of a happiness that had once seemed blighted.

Everard had always been so attentive, so solicitous, that she was as much surprised as chagrined to find that he had apparently forgotten the appointment. Hearing her astonished interrogation of Polly in the passage, Tom shambled from the sitting-room in his loose slippers and his blue check shirt, with his eternal clay pipe in his mouth, and informed her that Roxdal had gone out suddenly earlier in the afternoon.

"G-g-one out," stammered poor Clara, all confused. "But he asked me to come to tea."

"Oh, you're Miss Newell, I suppose," said Tom.

"Yes, I am Miss Newell."

"He has told me a great deal about you, but I wasn't able honestly to congratulate him on his choice till now."

Clara blushed uneasily under the compliment, and under the ardour of his admiring gaze. Instinctively she distrusted the man. The

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very first tones of his deep bass voice gave her a peculiar shudder. And then his impoliteness in smoking that vile clay was so gratuitous.

"Oh, then you must be Mr. Peters," she said in return. "He has often spoken to me of you."

"Ah!" said Tom, laughingly, "I suppose he's told you all my vices. That accounts for your not being surprised at my Sunday attire."

She smiled a little, showing a row of pearly teeth. "Everard ascribes to you all the virtues," she said.

"Now that's what I call a friend!" he cried, ecstatically. "But won't you come in? He must be back in a moment. He surely would not break an appointment with *you*." The admiration latent in the accentuation of the last pronoun was almost offensive.

She shook her head. She had a just grievance against Everard, and would punish him by going away indignantly.

"Do let *me* give you a cup of tea," Tom pleaded. "You must be awfully thirsty this sultry weather. There! I will make a bargain with you! If you will come in now, I promise to clear out the moment Everard returns, and not spoil your tête-à-tête." But Clara was obstinate; she did not at all relish this man's society, and besides, she was not going to throw away her grievance against Everard. "I know Everard will slang me dreadfully when he comes in if I let you go," Tom urged. "Tell me at least where he can find you."

"I am going to take the bus at Charing Cross, and I'm going straight home," Clara announced determinedly. She put up her parasol in a pet, and went up the street into the Strand. A cold shadow seemed to have fallen over all things. But just as she was getting in to the 'bus, a hansom dashed down Trafalgar Square, and a well-known voice hailed her. The hansom stopped, and Everard got out and held out his hand.

"I'm so glad you're a bit late," he said. "I was called out unexpectedly, and have been trying to rush back in time. You wouldn't have found me if you had been punctual. But I thought," he added, laughing, "I could rely on you as a woman."

"I *was* punctual," Clara said angrily. "I was not getting out of this 'bus, as you seem to imagine, but into it, and was going home."

"My darling!" he cried remorsefully. "A thousand apologies." The regret on his handsome face soothed her. He took the rose he was wearing in the buttonhole of his fashionably cut coat and gave it to her.

"Why were you so cruel?" he murmured, as she nestled against him in the hansom. "Think of my despair if I had come home to hear you had come and gone. Why didn't you wait a moment?"

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A shudder traversed her frame. "Not with that man, Peters!" she murmured.

"Not with that man, Peters!" he echoed sharply. "What is the matter with Peters?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't like him."

"Clara," he said, half sternly, half cajolingly, "I thought you were above these feminine weaknesses; you are punctual, strive also to be reasonable. Tom is my best friend. From boyhood we have been always together. There is nothing Tom would not do for me, or I for Tom. You must like him, Clara; you must, if only for my sake."

"I'll try," Clara promised, and then he kissed her in gratitude and broad daylight.

"You'll be very nice to him at tea, won't you?" he said anxiously. "I shouldn't like you two to be bad friends."

"I don't want to be bad friends," Clara protested; "only the moment I saw him a strange repulsion and mistrust came over me."

"You are quite wrong about him—quite wrong," he assured her earnestly. "When you know him better, you'll find him the best of fellows. Oh, I know," he said suddenly, "I suppose he was very untidy, and you women go so much by appearances!"

"Not at all," Clara retorted. " 'Tis you men who go by appearances."

"Yes, you do. That's why you care for me," he said, smiling.

She assured him it wasn't, and she didn't care for him so much as he plumed himself, but he smiled on. His smile died away, however, when he entered his rooms and found Tom nowhere.

"I daresay you've made him run about hunting for me," he grumbled.

"Perhaps he knew I'd come back, and went away to leave us together," she answered. "He said he would when you came."

"And yet you say you don't like him!"

She smiled reassuringly. Inwardly, however, she felt pleased at the man's absence.

If Clara Newell could have seen Tom Peters carrying on with Polly in the passage, she might have felt justified in her prejudice against him. It must be confessed, though, that Everard also carried on with Polly. Alas! it is to be feared that men are much of a muchness where women are concerned; shabby men and smart men, bank managers and journalists, bachelors and semi-detached bachelors. Perhaps it was a mistake after all to say the chums had nothing patently in common. Everard, I am afraid, kissed Polly rather more often than Clara, and although it was because he respected her less, the reason would perhaps not have been sufficiently consoling to his affianced wife. For

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Polly was pretty, especially on alternate Sunday afternoons, and when at ten P.M. she returned from her outings, she was generally met in the passage by one or other of the men. Polly liked to receive the homage of real gentlemen, and set her white cap at all indifferently. Thus, just before Clara knocked on that memorable Sunday afternoon, Polly, being confined to the house by the unwritten code regulating the lives of servants, was amusing herself by flirting with Peters.

"You *are* fond of me a little bit," the graceless Tom whispered, "aren't you?"

"You know I am, sir," Polly replied.

"You don't care for anyone else in the house?"

"Oh no, sir, and never let anyone kiss me but you. I wonder how it is, sir?" Polly replied ingenuously.

"Give me another," Tom answered.

She gave him another, and tripped to the door to answer Clara's knock.

And that very evening, when Clara was gone and Tom still out, Polly turned without the faintest atom of scrupulosity, or even jealousy, to the more fascinating Roxdal, and accepted his amorous advances. If it would seem at first sight that Everard had less excuse for such frivolity than his friend, perhaps the seriousness he showed in this interview may throw a different light upon the complex character of the man.

"You're quite sure you don't care for anyone but me?" he asked earnestly.

"Of course not, sir!" Polly replied indignantly. "How could I?"

"But you care for that soldier I saw you out with last Sunday?"

"Oh no, sir, he's only my young man," she said apologetically.

"Would you give him up?" he hissed suddenly.

Polly's pretty face took a look of terror. "I couldn't, sir! He'd kill me. He's such a jealous brute, you've no idea."

"Yes, but suppose I took you away from here?" he whispered eagerly. "Somewhere where he couldn't find you—South America, Africa, somewhere thousands of miles across the seas."

"Oh, sir, you frighten me!" whispered Polly, cowering before his ardent eyes, which shone in the dimly lit passage.

"Would you come with me?" he hissed. She did not answer; she shook herself free and ran into the kitchen, trembling with a vague fear.

One morning, earlier than his earliest hour of demanding his shaving water, Tom rang the bell violently and asked the alarmed Polly what had become of Mr. Roxdal.

"How should I know, sir?" she gasped. "Ain't he been in, sir?"

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"Apparently not," Tom answered anxiously. "He never remains out. We have been here three weeks now, and I can't recall a single night he hasn't been home before twelve. I can't make it out." All enquiries proved futile. Mrs. Seacon reminded him of the thick fog that had come on suddenly the night before.

"What fog?" asked Tom.

"Lord! didn't you notice it, sir?"

"No, I came in early, smoked, read, and went to bed about eleven. I never thought of looking out of the window."

"It began about ten," said Mrs. Seacon, "and got thicker and thicker. I couldn't see the lights of the river from my bedroom. The poor gentleman has been and gone and walked into the water." She began to whimper.

"Nonsense, nonsense," said Tom, though his expression belied his words. "At the worst I should think he couldn't find his way home, and couldn't get a cab, so put up for the night at some hotel. I daresay it will be all right." He began to whistle as if in restored cheerfulness. At eight o'clock there came a letter for Roxdal, marked "immediate," but as he did not turn up for breakfast, Tom went round personally to the City and Suburban Bank. He waited half an hour there, but the manager did not make his appearance. Then he left the letter with the cashier and went away with anxious countenance.

That afternoon it was all over London that the manager of the City and Suburban had disappeared, and that many thousand pounds of gold and notes had disappeared with him.

Scotland Yard opened the letter marked "immediate," and noted that there had been a delay in its delivery, for the address had been obscure, and an official alteration had been made. It was written in a feminine hand and said: "On second thoughts I cannot accompany you. Do not try to see me again. Forget me. I shall never forget you."

There was no signature.

Clara Newell, distracted, disclaimed all knowledge of this letter. Polly deposed that the fugitive had proposed flight to her, and the routes to Africa and South America were especially watched. Some months passed without result. Tom Peters went about overwhelmed with grief and astonishment. The police took possession of all the missing man's effects. Gradually the hue and cry dwindled, died.

"At last we meet!" cried Tom Peters, while his face lit up in joy. "How *are* you, dear Miss Newell?" Clara greeted him coldly. Her face had an abiding pallor now. Her lover's flight and shame had prostrated her for weeks. Her soul was the arena of contending instincts. Alone of all the world she still believed in Everard's inno-

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cence, felt that there was something more than met the eye, divined some devilish mystery behind it all. And yet that damning letter from the anonymous lady shook her sadly. Then, too, there was the deposition of Polly. When she heard Peters's voice accosting her all her old repugnance resurged. It flashed upon her that this man—Roxdal's boon companion—must know far more than he had told to the police. She remembered how Everard had spoken of him, with what affection and confidence! Was it likely he was utterly ignorant of Everard's movements? Mastering her repugnance, she held out her hand. It might be well to keep in touch with him; he was possibly the clue to the mystery. She noticed he was dressed a shade more trimly, and was smoking a meerschaum. He walked along at her side, making no offer to put his pipe out.

"You have not heard from Everard?" he asked. She flushed. "Do you think I'm an accessory after the fact?" she cried.

"No, no," he said soothingly. "Pardon me, I was thinking he might have written—giving no exact address, of course. Men do sometimes dare to write thus to women. But, of course, he knows you too well—you would have put the police on his track."

"Certainly," she exclaimed, indignantly. "Even if he is innocent he must face the charge."

"Do you still entertain the possibility of his innocence?"

"I do," she said boldly, and looked him full in the face. His eyelids drooped with a quiver. "Don't you?"

"I have hoped against hope," he replied, in a voice faltering with emotion. "Poor old Everard! But I am afraid there is no room for doubt. Oh, this wicked curse of money—tempting the noblest and the best of us."

The weeks rolled on. Gradually she found herself seeing more and more of Tom Peters, and gradually, strange to say, he grew less repulsive. From the talks they had together, she began to see that there was really no reason to put faith in Everard; his criminality, his faithlessness, were too flagrant. Gradually she grew ashamed of her early mistrust of Peters; remorse bred esteem, and esteem ultimately ripened into feelings so warm, that when Tom gave freer vent to the love that had been visible to Clara from the first, she did not repulse him.

It is only in books that love lives forever. Clara, so her father thought, showed herself a sensible girl in plucking out an unworthy affection and casting it from her heart. He invited the new lover to his house, and took to him at once. Roxdal's somewhat supercilious manner had always jarred upon the unsophisticated corn merchant. With Tom the old man got on much better. While evidently quite as well informed and cultured as his whilom friend, Tom knew how to

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impart his superior knowledge with the accent on the knowledge rather than on the superiority, while he had the air of gaining much information in return. Those who are most conscious of defects of early education are most resentful of other people sharing their consciousness. Moreover, Tom's *bonhomie* was far more to the old fellow's liking than the studied politeness of his predecessor, so that on the whole Tom made more of a conquest of the father than of the daughter. Nevertheless, Clara was by no means unresponsive to Tom's affection, and when, after one of his visits to the house, the old man kissed her fondly and spoke of the happy turn things had taken, and how, for the second time in their lives, things had mended when they seemed at their blackest, her heart swelled with a gush of gratitude and joy and tenderness, and she fell sobbing into her father's arms.

Tom calculated that he made a clear five hundred a year by occasional journalism, besides possessing some profitable investments which he had inherited from his mother, so that there was no reason for delaying the marriage. It was fixed for May Day, and the honeymoon was to be spent in Italy.

But Clara was not destined to happiness. From the moment she had promised herself to her first love's friend old memories began to rise up and reproach her. Strange thoughts stirred in the depths of her soul, and in the silent watches of the night she seemed to hear Everard's accents, charged with grief and upbraiding. Her uneasiness increased as her wedding day drew near. One night, after a pleasant afternoon spent in being rowed by Tom among the upper reaches of the Thames, she retired to rest full of vague forebodings. And she dreamt a terrible dream. The dripping form of Everard stood by her bedside, staring at her with ghastly eyes. Had he been drowned on the passage to his land of exile? Frozen with horror, she put the question.

"I have never left England!" the vision answered.

Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

"Never left England?" she repeated, in tones which did not seem to be hers.

The wraith's stony eyes stared on, but there was silence.

"Where have you been then?" she asked in her dream.

"Very near you," came the answer.

"There has been foul play then!" she shrieked.

The phantom shook its head in doleful assent.

"I knew it!" she shrieked. "Tom Peters—Tom Peters has done away with you. Is it not he? Speak!"

"Yes, it is he—Tom Peters—whom I loved more than all the world."

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Even in the terrible oppression of the dream she could not resist saying, woman-like:

"Did I not warn you against him?"

The phantom stared on silently and made no reply.

"But what was his motive?" she asked at length.

"Love of gold—and you. And you are giving yourself to him," it said sternly.

"No, no, Everard! I will not! I will not! I swear it! Forgive me!"

The spirit shook its head sceptically.

"You love him. Women are false—as false as men."

She strove to protest again, but her tongue refused its office.

"If you marry him, I shall always be with you! Beware!"

The dripping figure vanished as suddenly as it came, and Clara awoke in a cold perspiration. Oh, it was horrible! The man she had learnt to love, the murderer of the man she had learnt to forget! How her original prejudice had been justified! Distracted, shaken to her depths, she would not take counsel even of her father, but informed the police of her suspicions. A raid was made on Tom's room, and lo! the stolen notes were discovered in a huge bundle. It was found that he had several banking accounts, with a large, recently paid amount in each bank. Tom was arrested. Attention was now concentrated on the corpses washed up by the river. It was not long before the body of Roxdal came to shore, the face distorted almost beyond recognition by long immersion, but the clothes patently his, and a pocket-book in the breast-pocket removing the last doubt: Mrs. Seacon and Polly and Clara Newell all identified the body. Both juries returned a verdict of murder against Tom Peters, the recital of Clara's dream producing a unique impression in the court and throughout the country. The theory of the prosecution was that Roxdal had brought home the money, whether to fly alone or to divide it, or whether even for some innocent purpose, as Clara believed, was immaterial. That Peters determined to have it all, that he had gone out for a walk with the deceased, and, taking advantage of the fog, had pushed him into the river, and that he was further impelled to the crime by love for Clara Newell, as was evident from his subsequent relations with her. The judge put on the black cap. Tom Peters was duly hung by the neck till he was dead.

Brief Résumé of the Culprit's Confession

When you all read this I shall be dead and laughing at you. I have been hung for my own murder. I am Everard G. Roxdal. I am also Tom Peters. We two were one. When I was a young man my moustache and beard wouldn't come. I bought false ones to improve my appearance.

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One day, after I had become manager of the City and Suburban Bank, I took off my beard and moustache at home, and then the thought crossed my mind that nobody would know me without them. I was another man. Instantly it flashed upon me that if I ran away from the Bank, that other man could be left in London, while the police were scouring the world for a non-existent fugitive. But this was only the crude germ of the idea. Slowly I matured my plan. The man who was going to be left in London must be known to a circle of acquaintance beforehand. It would be easy enough to masquerade in the evenings in my beardless condition, with other disguises of dress and voice. But this was not brilliant enough. I conceived the idea of living with him. It was Box and Cox reversed. We shared rooms at Mrs. Seacon's. It was a great strain, but it was only for a few weeks. I had trick clothes in my bedroom like those of quick-change artistes; in a moment I could pass from Roxdal to Peters and from Peters to Roxdal. Polly had to clean two pairs of boots a morning, cook two dinners, etc., etc. She and Mrs. Seacon saw one or the other of us every moment; it never dawned upon them they never saw us *both together.* At meals I would not be interrupted, ate off two plates, and conversed with my friend in loud tones. At other times we dined at different hours. On Sundays he was supposed to be asleep when I was in church. There is no landlady in the world to whom the idea would have occurred that one man was troubling himself to be two (and to pay for two, including washing). I worked up the idea of Roxdal's flight, asked Polly to go with me, manufactured that feminine letter that arrived on the morning of my disappearance. As Tom Peters I mixed with a journalistic set. I had another room where I kept the gold and notes till I mistakenly thought the thing had blown over. Unfortunately, returning from here on the night of my disappearance, with Roxdal's clothes in a bundle I intended to drop into the river, it was stolen from me in the fog, and the man into whose possession it ultimately came appears to have committed suicide. What, perhaps, ruined me was my desire to keep Clara's love, and to transfer it to the survivor. Everard told her I was the best of fellows. Once married to her, I would not have had much fear. Even if she had discovered the trick, a wife cannot give evidence against her husband, and often does not want to. I made none of the usual slips, but no man can guard against a girl's nightmare after a day up the river and a supper at the Star and Garter. I might have told the judge he was an ass, but then I should have had penal servitude for bank robbery, and that is worse than death. The only thing that puzzles me, though, is whether the law has committed murder or I suicide.

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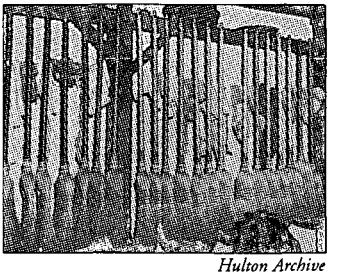
THE STORY THAT WON

The November Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Michael Gianakis of New Orleans, Louisiana. Honorable mentions go to Ray Chabot of Waterdown, Ontario, Canada; Fred A. Hastings of Norfolk, Massachusetts; Gayle Nourse of Clarkston, Washington; Kevin D. McElhinney of Brattleboro, Vermont; Steven E. Albrecht of Helena, Montana; David Magnusson of Hialeah, Florida; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; and J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas.



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WITCHES' PARKING LOT

MICHAEL GIANAKIS

The sun was down. It was Halloween and "Treating" time. My brother and I covered the same area each year, stopping at the railroad tracks. On the other side loomed a large house, usually dark and empty. Tonight, light filtering through the curtains revealed shadowy figures moving around.

Nick turned to me. "A party! Party treats—let's go!"

After knocking, we listened. Singing or chanting was the only response we heard. Knocking harder, a "Trick or Treat!" was added. They still ignored us. Again, "Trick or Treat, people!" Another wait.

There was a low grumbling, then the door slowly creaked open. A gruff-looking old lady appeared who looked like the model for Halloween posters.

Smiling, we started, "Trick—"

Placing a finger to her lips, she shushed us. My mouth was still open and she noticed it.

"Shut up!" she directed at me. "Now get out of here—brats! Before I turn you into toads!"

Wide-eyed, we looked at each other and back to her. The retreat down the steps was swift. "Have a good day," I offered over my shoulder.

Nick pointed to the side of the house. "Look at the brooms—let's take them!" We took them to the tracks and deposited the lot into an empty box car.

In the morning paper, our mother read an unusual item about "a flurry of taxi cab pick-ups from a residence by the tracks, but no record of drop-offs."

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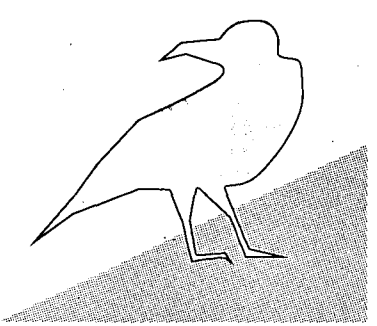

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